

“IN THIS WAY THE MOUNTAIN LIVES”: AN ECOCRITICAL  
READING OF JOHN EHLE’S APPALACHIAN FICTION

A  
Thesis  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### **“IN THIS WAY THE MOUNTAIN LIVES”: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF JOHN EHLE’S APPALACHIAN FICTION**

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John Marsden Ehle, born in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1925, has written seventeen books—including seven novels set in the Appalachian Mountains. These texts chronicle the lives of the Wright and King families of Western North Carolina who survive and adapt to a constantly changing world from the late eighteenth century into the Great Depression. Although these “Mountain Novels” are rich with historical detail, regional folklore, and incredibly compelling plots, they have received little scholarly attention. John Ehle’s fiction is also full of contests between humans and the surrounding natural world. The interactions between nature and human nature in two of Ehle’s novels set in the Appalachian region—*The Land Breakers* and *The Road*—are the focus of this thesis. More specifically, this project describes how John Ehle’s fiction connects to the ideas of preservationist John Muir, who argued for humans to find a “right relationship” with the earth. Terry Gifford in *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* describes this search

for balance between human needs and the integrity of ecosystems. This thesis investigates how characters in John Ehle's novels search for a "right relationship" with the natural world, so that they may more fully understand John Muir's famous quotation, "Going to the Mountains is Going Home."

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	vi
Chapter 1: “In This Way the Mountain Lives”: Introduction & Literature Review .....	1
Chapter 2: Humility & Horror: Responses to the Natural Sublime in Ehle’s Fiction .....	22
Chapter 3: “Everyday Nature” and Identity in Ehle’s Fiction .....	58
Chapter 4: The “Responsibility of Restraint” in Ehle’s Fiction .....	80
Chapter 5: A Coda .....	101
Works Cited .....	111
Vita .....	117



## Chapter 1: “In This Way the Mountain Lives”: Introduction & Literature Review

A creek is an artery of a mountain, though its blood is not salty. The blood oozes through the ground; the water cleanses the body, permits the earth to breathe deep inside itself. You see, most all the water is inside the mountain, not bubbling and cascading and twirling here in sight in the creeks, it is coursing through the ground. It seeps through and breathes into it, and in this way the mountain lives.

(Ehle, *The Journey of August King* 1)

With this vivid description, John Ehle begins his novel *The Journey of August King*, which chronicles a cattle drive trek where August King inadvertently encounters a runaway slave woman named Annalees. By helping Annalees escape to the North, August secures not only her freedom, but also his own. August King, a young resident of the North Carolina mountains in the late eighteenth century, tragically lost his wife to suicide a year before the novel begins. In his immense grief, August blamed himself for his wife’s death and began to resent his home and the surrounding landscape. But by aiding Annalees, August returns to his mountain community with the appreciation of the “way the mountain lives” (Ehle, *Journey of August King* 1). Literary scholar John Lang, in writing about *The Journey of August King*, comments that August’s “archetypal journey” of his “literal return from the region’s fall market, the one event that draws him out of his small mountain community each year,

becomes a symbolic quest for an enlarged understanding of his own identity” (“Shape of Love” 66). While August certainly comes to learn more about himself as he embarks on the dangerous and illegal task of assisting a runaway slave, he also learns a great deal about the natural world. He is a man who believes that all living beings in a landscape, even the “animals” must “become [a] part of the place” in order to survive (Ehle, *Journey of August King* 2). August’s own philosophy of the land insists that all creatures “must share the life of a place. All beasts, even men, must. It is wonderfully simple, yet complex” (Ehle, *Journey of August King* 2). This poignant explanation for the natural order of things, “wonderfully simple, yet complex,” could easily be applied to all of John Ehle’s seven novels set in the American Mountain South. Interactions between nature and human nature in two of Ehle’s novels, *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* will be the focus of this thesis.

### **“Tell Mr. Ehle, please, to get out of Appalachia”**

After penning his first novel set in the American Mountain South, John Ehle contacted the British publishers who marketed his first two works of fiction. Ehle reached out to these publishers with the hopes that his newest novel, *The Lion on the Hearth*, would be sold and distributed abroad, as were his first two works of historical fiction, *Move Over Mountain* set during the Civil Rights Era in North Carolina, and *Kingstree Island*, set on North Carolina’s costal Outer Banks. Unfortunately for Mr. Ehle, rather than a book deal, he received the following note, “Tell Mr. Ehle, please, to get out of Appalachia.” This experience stuck with Ehle, as he shared the anecdote with an interviewer in 2005, more than four decades later. Ehle elaborated that when he began writing about the Appalachian Mountains and Appalachian people, British publishers “wouldn’t touch” his books (Bogges 42).

Ehle seemed to think that the reason he was told to “get out of Appalachia” had deep, historical roots. Ehle suggested that “Appalachia has a bad connotation in England because of the old Appalachian stereotypes,” highlighting the immense irony that he could not get his Appalachian fiction published in England, “even though it is written about the people that came over” to the United States “from the UK” (Bogges 42). These “old Appalachian stereotypes,” which characterize mountaineers as lazy, violent, feuding, and fatalistic, among other negative qualities, have roots extending back to post-Civil War America, according to scholar Henry Shapiro (3-33), and perhaps as far back as the end of the 18th century, according to literary critic Katherine Ledford (47-67). However old their construction, these stereotypes still influence modern understandings and perceptions of the region. For most, Appalachia remains as one sensationalist writer described it, “a strange land and peculiar people” (Shapiro ix). John Ehle’s fiction, remarkably avoids these “old Appalachian stereotypes,” and for this, students, scholars, and critics alike should be thankful that Mr. Ehle never did “leave Appalachia,” even though his literature about the American Mountain South has still not received the widespread interest and acclaim it deserves.

John Marsden Ehle, born in Asheville, North Carolina in 1925, served as a US Army rifleman in WWII, taught Theater and Drama courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was instrumental in the creation of the North Carolina School for the Arts, and worked as a special assistant to Governor Terry Sanford (Lang “Ehle, John” 1058). Ehle is not only an accomplished civil servant, but also the author of seventeen books, seven of which are novels set in the Appalachian region—he refers to them as the “Mountain Novels.” Ehle has described these books as works “about two leading families and their growth and lives and interrelations” (“A Conversation” 10). In these texts, the Wright and King families

and their descendants forge ahead through their lives despite loss, heartbreak, and economic strife, as wars, industrialization, and conflicting notions of “progress” transform the only home they have ever known, the North Carolina mountains. A modern reading of these texts reveals so much more than the intricacies of American life in the Southern Mountains from 1790 to the Great Depression. In these novels, John Ehle shows that he is far more than an Appalachian or Southern writer, rather, the intersections between people and planet, mountains and mountaineers, illustrate Ehle’s aptitude and genius as a nature writer.

Ehle’s “Mountain Novels” garnered positive reviews and acclaim upon their initial release. William J. Schafer, in a 1983 *Appalachian Journal* review of Ehle’s Appalachian novel, *The Winter People*, wrote that the book “captures the spirit of time and place vividly, with a narrative shaped like a myth or a dream . . . giving us a new way to consider the survival strategies of traditional societies” (390). Excerpts of Ehle’s *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* were popular enough to be featured in Reader’s Digest’s Condensed Books Series. Two of Ehle’s Appalachian novels were developed into feature films: *The Winter People* and *The Journey of August King*.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the popularity of these books, Appalachian literature scholar John Lang commented that John Ehle’s literary career, which now spans nearly half a century, is one of both “excellent reviews and inexplicable scholarly neglect” (“Shape of Love” 65).

William Parrill and Terry Roberts have each offered possible explanations for the absence of John Ehle’s work in broader discussions of canonical Southern literature and American realism. Writing in critique of Louis D. Rubin’s 1985 text, *The History of Southern*

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<sup>1</sup> For scholarship on film adaptations of John Ehle’s novels, see, John Inscoe’s essay “A Fugitive Slave in Frontier Appalachia: The Journey of August King on Film,” in *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* and Jack Wright and John Inscoe’s article, “Hollywood Does Antebellum Appalachia and Gets It (half) Right: The Journey of August King,” in *Appalachian Journal*.

*Literature*, William Parrill laments the omission of Ehle's works in this volume, stating that this text "is likely to set the canon for Southern literature for the next generation" of readers, scholars, and critics (8). Parrill further suggests that John Ehle's fiction did not receive critical attention in *The History of Southern Literature* and other large scale examinations of letters from the American South because his works are not taught as widely in colleges and universities as other Southern writers, such as Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. Parrill explains that Wolfe and Faulkner texts were embraced in graduate-level English programs where many young scholars developed critical articles and later incorporated the texts of these Southern writers into their own teaching careers. This pedagogical incorporation encouraged even more students to develop critical examinations, contributing to the canonization of these texts rather than other Southern writers such as John Ehle (Parrill 8). While it is true that Ehle's fiction has not been given the attention of Wolfe's and Faulkner's within higher education, that omission does not provide a compelling explanation for the lack of serious scholarship on Ehle's "Mountain Novels." Certainly graduate students should be given the agency of following their own "intellectual tickles" in terms of studying any writer.

Terry Roberts offers a much more compelling explanation of this scholarly gap with his emphasis on Ehle's attention to the Appalachian region. Roberts writes of Ehle that "for years his national reputation has suffered for the same reason that so many knowledgeable readers celebrate him" ("Wonderfully Simple, Yet Complex" 12). Roberts argues that John Ehle's fiction has largely been ignored because of the novels' setting, western North Carolina, commenting that Ehle "has chosen to set his most important books not just in the South but in what outsiders might stereotype as the most backward and benighted part of the

South” (“Wonderfully Simple, Yet Complex” 12). According to Roberts, selecting “the Southern mountains as his setting was on Ehle’s part an ongoing and calculated risk” (“Wonderfully Simple, Yet Complex” 12). Ehle is also of the opinion that his focus on the Appalachian region has limited the exposure and popularity of his work. In a 2005 interview featured in *Appalachian Journal*, Ehle relayed to interviewer Carol Boggess that his novel *The Road* was marked “a regional book” upon initial release (42). Ehle was astounded by the reviewer’s statement that “perhaps no other writer in America could have a national publisher for a novel that’s regional” (Boggess 42). Ehle commented that he “was astonished” and that he “didn’t know a regional book from a catbird” (Boggess 42). Ehle lamented that, thanks largely to that reviewer, he “became known as an Appalachian regional writer” (Boggess 42).

It seems highly probable that Ehle’s label as an “Appalachian regional writer” combined with the absence of his works from graduate education has severely limited the scholarly attention and critique directed at his works.<sup>2</sup> In his essay, “Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia,” literature scholar Rodger Cunningham argues that “the ‘national’ literary world remains nearly unaware of the burgeoning of writing within the [Appalachian] region” (41). Cunningham is incredibly bothered by the fact that the American Mountain South’s “first-rate poetry and fiction...which fits neither century-old convention—pastoral idyll or degrading stereotype” is rarely reviewed in national publications (41). Cunningham attributes this lack of large-scale attention devoted to Appalachian literature to the double alterity inherent in the identity and

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<sup>2</sup> While John Ehle’s written work has not received as wide spread acclaim and investigation as it deserves, Ehle’s work is discussed in the only extant critical volume dedicated solely to the study of Appalachian literature: Leslie Banner’s essay entitled “John Ehle and Appalachian Fiction,” in *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*.

understanding of the American Mountain South. Just as in post-Civil War America, when the former Confederate South became the internal other of the unionist North, the non-slaveholding American Mountain South became the “Other’s Other—a region marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being and yet, by that very fact opens up unusual possibilities for a self-articulation of being” (42). Cunningham views Appalachian otherness as a limiting factor in the critical review and acclaim of the region’s letters, but also recognizes the unique opportunity for identity-making that this “othered other” possesses. Because Appalachia does not fit into the “cookie-cutter” image of broader America, it often does not garner large-scale attention for its letters, but it also has a unique opportunity to define itself. John Ehle has in fact created his own version of Appalachian voice, one that as the following thesis will explore, examines the ways in which mountaineers interact with the mountains around them.

Although Ehle’s work has not been widely studied, as the works of Lang, Parrill, and Roberts illustrate, there have been some scholarly examinations of Ehle’s Appalachian fiction. The majority of these critical works on Ehle’s novels were published as the result of literary festivals and gatherings celebrating Ehle’s writing. While these essays are certainly valuable and provide further legitimacy to the study of the “Mountain Novels,” Ehle’s presence at these events may have influenced the scholarship itself. It is possible that festival presenters, knowing Ehle would be in the audience, crafted papers which praised the quality and complexity of the Ehle’s Appalachian fiction by exploring broad themes that resonate throughout the novels, rather than evaluating the texts through theoretical frameworks. Even though these works may not be as critical or theory-driven as one would expect, they merit investigation in order to understand what has already been explored in Ehle’s literary fiction.

In Spring 1987, Emory & Henry College dedicated an entire issue of *The Iron Mountain Review* to the fiction of John Ehle. This issue, which published the proceedings of the John Ehle Literary Festival hosted at Emory & Henry College in fall 1987, contains a thoughtful introduction by Mr. Ehle himself entitled, “Near and Distant Kin.” In this piece, Ehle describes the characters in his “Mountain Novels” as “kin, often related distantly to me . . . but closely to each other” (“Near and Distant Kin” 4). Ehle’s connection to his characters motivates him to “get up early every morning and hurry to meet with them” (“Near and Distant Kin” 4). Ehle also suggests that he has developed stronger kinship ties with his family of characters over time: “At our early meetings the characters were immature . . . As we met, they began to mature, to take over the story . . . becoming people in their own right” (“Near and Distant Kin” 4-5). Ehle affords his characters permission “to grow, to becoming themselves,” which “leads to the maturing of the characters and the victory of the novelist and his emancipation from them” (“Near and Distant Kin” 5). Ehle’s relationship with his characters, a key part of his writing process, also offers an interesting perspective about regional identity and the author’s Asheville roots.

The John Ehle issue of *The Iron Mountain Review* also features “A Conversation” with John Ehle and another acclaimed writer from Asheville, North Carolina, Wilma Dykeman. In this transcribed interview, Dykeman delves into the ways in which the mountain region informed Ehle’s art. When asked about his own family history, Ehle responds that his aunts and uncles on his mother’s side of the family “were born storytellers” and influenced him heavily as a child (“A Conversation” 6). When Dykeman asked Ehle if “there was a special influence in Asheville, the kind of town it was, a tourist town, a small



non-industrial town” (“A Conversation” 6) that informed his work as a writer, Ehle provided a particularly interesting answer:

I was always proud of the city. I must say I grew up with a feeling that I’d been born in the promised land. As a boy I read the Bible a great deal, and I saw my people as a chosen people in a Promised Land . . . . And a lot of tourists came into Asheville every summer and fall and spring, and praised the place . . . . Tourists always spoke well of Asheville. They spoke of it as a charming, beautiful city, so it gave me a sense of pride in the place . . . (“A Conversation” 6-7)

Several years later, Ehle once again commented on his positive understanding of the often degraded and detested Appalachian region. In an interview for *Appalachian Journal*, when asked if the “Mountain Novels” have a particular theme, Ehle responded: “I see the Appalachians as solid and human people and Appalachia being a success . . . . I consider Appalachia to be a success” (Boggess 50). When this “success story” narrative was questioned, Ehle referred to his own upbringing in Asheville, responding, “I was proud to be from Asheville . . . . Living in Asheville and being part of it was a religious experience in my family . . . I transferred to my being in Appalachia the belief that I was of the chosen people in the promised land” (Boggess 51). This sunny perception Ehle has of the American Mountain South certainly contributes to his thoughtful character development and plot lines in his novels. Ehle’s perspective on the region sets his work apart from other writers who present a more bleak view of people and places in Appalachian fiction, but it seems some critics interested in Ehle’s work have allowed his positive portrayals of mountaineers to overshadow the complexity of the novels themselves.

Leslie Banner explores Ehle's flattering depictions of mountains and mountaineers in her essay entitled, "John Ehle and Appalachian Fiction." Banner writes that many of Ehle's contemporaries composed "serious literature" as natives of Appalachia and this body of work "can in general be described as realistic literature having two veins, naturalistic and romantic" (175). In terms of creating successful romantic literature in the Appalachian Mountains "in which the figure of the mountaineer appears, emergent from the great Southern Wilderness, triumphant and profoundly American," Banner argues that two writers have accomplished such lofty goals: Thomas Wolfe and John Ehle (175). Banner concludes her exaltation of Ehle's work by suggesting that John Ehle's "Mountain Novels" transform understandings of "mountaineers" as he has "revised this figure into the mainstream of American life, lending dignity and character to one of the most persistent stereotypes in popular American culture. In the process he has given us a revitalized American hero and a sense of our uniquely American identity" (182). While Ehle's fiction does not perpetuate negative stereotypes about the inhabitants and culture of the Appalachian South, Banner's promotion of Ehle's characters as "uniquely American" is stereotypical in and of itself, and such a view silences many of the diverse voices in Ehle's fiction in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. By suggesting that Ehle is reformatting the mountaineer from detestable to enviable, Banner is nonetheless promoting an incomplete and inaccurate portrayal of the region's historical inhabitants.

The remaining scholarly articles prompted by Ehle's Appalachian novels are primarily the result of the John Ehle Special Issue of *Pembroke Magazine* (1999), which, like the Ehle issue of *The Iron Mountain Review*, was also the culmination of an academic gathering focused on John Ehle's writing. Within this issue of *Pembroke Magazine* entitled,

*John Ehle: "Born to Be a Writer,"* researchers will appreciate the comprehensive bibliography of Ehle's works as composed by Sue Laslie Kimball and Lynn Veach Sadler. This issue also contains transcripts of thoughtful speeches on John Ehle's life and work including a statement from former North Carolina governor Terry Sanford who provides rich detail and background to Ehle's political work as well as evidence of his immense character.

*John Ehle: "Born to Be a Writer"* also features several scholarly articles and works of criticism about Ehle's Appalachian fiction that are informative for any research on the "Mountain Novels." Harriette C. Buchanan writes that Ehle's novel *The Winter People* expertly binds comedy and tragedy (46-51). Frances Roe Kestler argues that John Ehle portrays female characters with just as much significance and complexity as he affords men in his novels (99-109). Terry Roberts emphasizes the role of community in Ehle's novels and makes a compelling argument for the incorporation of Ehle's work into the broader canon of Southern literature ("Within the Green Bowl" 55-62). While all of these works illustrate the complexity of Ehle's writing, a large amount of Ehle's work still remains unexplored, particularly in terms of examining the role of the environment within his Appalachian fiction.

### **"The Mountain Novels" and Ecocriticism**

While there has been some scholarly inquiry aimed at John Ehle's Appalachian fiction, there is far more work to be done, particularly in examining the interactions between nature and human nature, mountains and mountaineers in the "Mountain Novels." In the opening pages of the 1987 "John Ehle Issue" of *The Iron Mountain Review*, Mr. Ehle penned the following remarks about his work set in Appalachia:

The main character in these seven mountain novels is the mountains themselves, I was born under them, they cupped me as a boy, have shaded my own life, they've

lorded it over me, and in my novels they lord it over my people. Their streams are the region's blood, their winds are deep breaths. ("Near and Distant Kin" 4)

As the above commentary illustrates, understanding and appreciating John Ehle's Appalachian fiction is inextricably linked to understanding and appreciating the natural world. In other words, Ehle's mountains cannot be separated from his mountaineers.

The following thesis Chapters 2-4 will provide an analysis and critique of Ehle's novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* with a focus on Ehle's attention to the natural world. This approach to literary criticism, with the environment as the analytical nucleus, also known as ecocriticism, is a burgeoning and quickly growing field with many opportunities for original scholarship. Ecocriticism is "an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human" and focuses largely on the "anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere" (Marland 846). For some scholars, the "multiplicity of perspectives" and "objects of study" encompassed within the "umbrella term" ecocriticism have "contributed to an enduring perception in certain quarters of the academy that ecocriticism lacks legitimacy or coherence as an area of critical theory" (Marland 846). According to Peter Barry, in his volume *Beginning Theory*, ecocriticism occupies "the academic margins" and is relegated to this fringe position because of its lack of "a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures" (239). While this flexibility and lack of a rigid theoretical framework may be troublesome for Peter Barry, ecocritic Serpil Opperman suggests that even "if the various developments in ecocriticism are unified neither by a common object nor by a single theoretical language they can, however, still be viewed as participating in a shared intellectual attitude" (17).

For Opperman, ecocriticism is at its core a postmodern field “in the way it disseminates across diverse intellectual trends” (18). Because ecocriticism incorporates such a wide variety of discourses, including “diversity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, situatedness, contextuality, and subversion of unitary categorizations,” it is not a field without “doctrines or procedures” but rather a field that embraces the fractured reality of the modern era and is therefore applicable to practical interactions between humans and the non-human world. For the purposes of this study, the definition of ecocriticism provided by Cheryll Glotfelty in the Introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* is most useful. Glotfelty writes: “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). She draws connections between the contributions of feminist criticism and Marxist criticism to the examinations of gender and class, respectively, within literature and ecocriticism’s ability to encourage “an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty xvii).

In order to address the complex and continually worsening issues that are facing our planet today, scholars, students, and activists alike must employ an interdisciplinary, postmodern approach. As the ramifications of global climate change manifest in the modern world with increased frequency and ferocity of storms and natural disasters, extended periods of heat waves and droughts, rapid biodiversity losses, increases in average oceanic and atmospheric temperatures, and disruptions to water and food security (Maslin 68-94); there has never before in human history been a time where an understanding of the environment has been so incredibly necessary for the survival and success of both people and planet.<sup>3</sup> These environmental crises are not only alarming, they are incredibly interconnected. Human

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<sup>3</sup> For an accessible account of the current (as of 2017) data on climate change, including the findings of the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, see *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* by Mark Maslin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

beings have degraded our natural environment to such a degree that as scholars we no longer have the luxury of operating in a closed system, only communicating and collaborating with those in our own insular fields. As the effects of climate change and the overall degraded quality of planet earth becomes increasingly more apparent and threatening, we must take a postmodern approach to environmental issues, one that blends various knowledge bases and discourses. Given the multitude of environmental crises impending upon the world today, it is vital to develop more coherent, interconnected understandings of the relationship between nature and human nature as expressed in all mediums, including literature.

### **Ehle's Appalachian Fiction and Ecocriticism**

According to *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region*, Appalachian literature is “distinguished more from the general designation of southern literature, which is more Gothic and more concerned with North-South conflicts, among other differences” (“Appalachian Literature” 199). Literature set in or about the American Mountain South is defined as “sometimes distinguished from other [regional literature] by its strong emphasis on setting, or ‘place,’ as an influence upon the values and motivations of characters” (“Appalachian Literature” 199). This handbook, a college textbook composed by some of the leading scholars in the field of Appalachian Studies, is not alone in emphasizing the “sense of place” in Appalachian literature.<sup>4</sup> Although widely accepted as a foundational characteristic of the genre, the role of “place” in Appalachian literature has not received much critical

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the sense of place in Appalachian literature and the connections between Appalachian studies and the broader field of Southern studies, see Erica Abrams Locklear's *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women's Literacies* and Casey Clabough's *Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature: Region and Place in the Twenty-First Century* and *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, Tom Lynch et al. In a review of these three books, Mae Miller Claxton writes, “because of the systematic removal of resources from the Appalachian region, Appalachian literature brings an ecocritical focus to the study of the south that has not often been part of more traditional southern scholarship” (“Remapping the South” 116).

examination in terms of the environment.<sup>5</sup> Ecocriticism, the critical study of the environment's role in literature, offers greater understandings of the natural world as well as valuable and applicable theoretical frameworks for the examination of the "sense of place" in Appalachian literature, specifically, the ways in which Appalachian letters engages with landscapes.

In the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, Fred Waage writes: "Literature set in the Appalachian region frequently invokes the natural environment and humankind's relationship to it" ("Environmental Writing" 1058). Waage defines environmental writing "as writing of any genre that gives at least equal standing to human culture and nonhuman nature" ("Environmental Writing" 1058). Although Appalachian literature has many canonical writers that place nature and human nature on an even playing field in their work, including Lee Smith, Barbara Kingsolver, Wilma Dykeman, John Ehle, and many others, few scholars have applied ecocritical theory to the fiction and poetry of the American Mountain South. In his essay "Exploring the 'Life Territory:' Ecology and Ecocriticism in Appalachia," Waage points out that for the most part: "Discussions of Appalachian ecology as separate from, or at least on a parity with, its human culture, have lagged behind other subjects of concern [within Appalachian Studies] such as religion, economy, community life, and 'folk arts'" (146). Waage elaborates that "where ecological considerations enter a discussion as significant players, they have traditionally been 'factors in' some larger social concern, even

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<sup>5</sup> In "Toward a Post-Appalachian Sense of Place," Zackary Vernon applies postsouthern theory (particularly that of Scott Romine in *Real South*,) to question the validity and authenticity of an Appalachian sense of place in recent historical novels by Ron Rash, Terry Roberts, and Charles Frazier, set in the American Mountain South. Vernon predicts that future writers of Appalachian literature will take on a post-Appalachian approach to the region's culture, and "either increasingly develop an ironic, parodic, and even parasitic relationship with past Appalachian literary forms and voices or...they will rely on the commodification of Appalachian identity" (Vernon 658). Vernon concludes that either of these fractured realities will force Appalachian studies scholars "to face the impossible postmodern task of deciding what, if anything, constitutes cultural and literary authenticity" (658).

if they do have significance in the problem at hand” (“Exploring” 146-47). Waage’s analysis reveals that there is ample room for more ecocritical analyses of Appalachian environmental writing.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Case for an Appalachian Post-Pastoral**

While ecocriticism is a large and growing field, containing many schools of thought useful to investigate various themes in Appalachian literature including ecofeminism, environmental justice, and animal studies; the post-pastoral offers a particularly valuable theoretical model for the examination of place in Appalachian literature. The post-pastoral, as defined by ecocritic and John Muir scholar Terry Gifford, is “a cultural practice that seeks to reconnect our species and its home, reconnects our practical literary activities to help us represent John Muir’s notion of a right relationship with nature that is hopefully not utopian in the idealized sense” (*Reconnecting with John Muir* 13-14).<sup>7</sup> This cultural practice of the post-pastoral illustrates how the written word can function to change the way human culture understands and interacts with the environment, inspiring increased environmental awareness and conservation that hopefully functions to “reconnect” us with the earth. In *Reconnecting*

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<sup>6</sup> Waage does not list John Ehle as an environmental writer in either his *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* entry or his “Exploring the ‘Life Territory’” essay. He does, however, include several valuable examples of other Appalachian environmental writing texts that would be valuable subjects for an ecocritical study, including *Appalachian Wilderness* by Eliot Porter and Edward Abbey, *Out Under the Sky of the Great Smokies: A Personal Journal* by Harvey Broome as well as Ian Marshall’s *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail*, a wonderful example of narrative scholarship in which Marshall writes about hiking the Appalachian Trail while writing and thinking about literature set in various communities along the trail.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Gifford also discusses the six guiding questions of the post-pastoral in his highly influential text, *Pastoral*. Gifford first proposed the term “post-pastoral” in reference to the poetry of Ted Hughes (Gifford, “Gods of Mud: Hughes and the Post-Pastoral”). In *Pastoral*, Gifford calls for “a new term to refer to literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language” (149). Based on this definition, I think of the “post” in “post-pastoral” as a nod to the fractured realities and multiple discourses common within the postmodern period. Although Hughes and Muir both wrote prior to the arrival of 20th century postmodernism, they both include a fusion of commonly separated knowledge bases in their writings, in particular a blurring of the divide between nature and culture. I have chosen to focus on Gifford’s post-pastoral work in *Reconnecting with John Muir* (2006) rather than *Pastoral* (1999) because of Gifford’s clear articulation and case studies of the interdisciplinary nature of John Muir’s writing life as described in *Reconnecting with John Muir*.



*with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* Gifford suggests that post-pastoral texts pose six general questions for readers:

1. “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” (31)
2. “What are the implications of recognizing that we [as humans] are part of that creative-destructive process” that dominates the entire universe? (32)
3. “If the processes of inner nature echo those of outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being close to the outer?” (32)
4. “If nature is culture, is culture nature?” (34)
5. “How...can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (34)
6. “How should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?” (35)

In *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*, John Ehle employs the post-pastoral in his depictions of the struggle for survival in the American Mountain South, the struggle not only to live but to find a “right relationship” between people and planet, between humans and their natural home. It is this quest to improve relations between mountains and mountaineers that distinguishes the post-pastoral from other variations of the pastoral.

The pastoral tradition in literature represents an impulse to explain and enjoy the natural world, one that extends back to some of the earliest western societies and also fundamentally shaped early America. In his highly influential text, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, cultural historian Leo Marx

comments that “the pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery” (3). Here Marx refers to the classical definition of the pastoral, a literary tradition with long roots, extending as far back as Roman poet Virgil in his text, *Eclogues*. The classical pastoral is characterized by a “withdraw from the great world” in order to “begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape” and involves the idealization of “a simple, rural environment” (*Machine in the Garden* 3, 5). Marx writes that many Europeans looked to the New World which would one day become America as the perfect platform for their own pastoral retreat from the ever-changing society to which they belonged. Further, according to Marx, the influx of European immigrants into the North American continent demonstrates a removal of the pastoral from its former literary context to a plan for developing “a new beginning for Western society” (*Machine in the Garden* 3).

While acknowledging the significance of the pastoral’s early roots on American soil, Marx advances the understanding of nature and human nature in the US in his distinction between two different types of pastoralism in American culture: the sentimental and the complex. Marx writes that the sentimental pastoral is “an expression less of thought than of feeling” about a landscape (*Machine in the Garden* 5). At the time of writing *The Machine in the Garden* in 1964, Marx identified the sentimental pastoral in American culture as the “flight from the city” where urbanites develop a “longing for a more ‘natural’ environment” and adopt a “contemptuous attitude” toward life in cities (*Machine in the Garden* 5). In modern America, a similar manifestation of the sentimental pastoral is the increasing trend of exurbanization, where wealthy citizens buy large homes and tracts of land outside of the bounds of cities and suburbs, a trend that is incredibly popular with the “second-home ownership” movement within modern Appalachia. According to Marx, the sentimental

pastoral “is likely to be at work,” “wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities” of daily life (*Machine in the Garden* 5).

In contrast to the emotion-driven, sentimental pastoral, Marx writes that the complex pastoral “brings a world which is more ‘real’ into juxtaposition with an idyllic version” (*Machine in the Garden* 25). For Marx, the complex pastoral can be characterized in a myriad of ways including “representing the plight of a dispossessed herdsman or the sound of a locomotive in the woods” (*Machine in the Garden* 25). Regardless of the detail in which this complex pastoralism emerges, it is the introduction of the often harsh realities of life in the countryside that distinguishes the complex pastoral from both the classical pastoral tradition and its sentimental iteration. While Leo Marx’s definition of the complex pastoral suggests that humans encounter the inherent danger present in the natural world, Terry Gifford’s conception of the post-pastoral pushes readers even further. Gifford’s six essential questions for readers function to inspire humans to make “better choices, individually and socially, for the survival of our species in its contested, evolving, amazing, barely understood, but inescapable home” (*Reconnecting* 176). It is this power of the post-pastoral, one that encourages readers to think and reflect on how to reconnect with the natural world, to not just live on the earth but with it, that separates the post-pastoral from Leo Marx’s complex pastoral.

John Ehle’s “Mountain Novels,” *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* are post-pastoral works that provide readers and critics with insight into the search for “doing things right” in the environment, the search for the “right relationship” with between people and planet,

between mountains and mountaineers.<sup>8</sup> In *The Land Breakers*, settlers in the Appalachian backwoods of the 1790s trying to survive in the rugged terrain of the American Mountain South, must learn to work with each other and with the land rather than simply “breaking it.” In *The Road*, the novel’s protagonist, Weatherby Wright, an overly ambitious man set on building a railroad on and through the North Carolina mountains in the decades following the Civil War, fails to find a “right relationship” with the natural world, a shortcoming that leads him to madness and proves fatal for those around him. This thesis will explore how *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* interact with the post-pastoral questions and appropriate secondary sources in three main chapters, each focused on two of the post-pastoral questions, as each pair of post-pastoral questions featured together in these chapters are strongly interconnected. Focusing on the post-pastoral questions in these connected pairings sharpens the focus of the thesis on reactions to the natural sublime, the incorporation of nature into everyday life, and the power of restraint in the face of environmental degradation. This thesis argues that characters in John Ehle’s novels who are humble, form their identities in connection with rather than opposition to the natural world, and are responsible in their interactions with other people and the landscape around them can achieve the “right relationship” with the surrounding environment, as offered through the post-pastoral.

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<sup>8</sup> Because of John Ehle’s interest in the natural world, all seven of his “Mountain Novels” contain powerful encounters between nature and human nature. In *The Journey of August King*, August’s banal trip to the nearby town to sell livestock transforms into an archetypal journey of return and renewal as his experiences along the rustic cattle road provide him a newfound interest and appreciation for his natural home. In *Time of Drums* protagonist Owen Wright, a conflicted Confederate soldier in a Unionist family finds direct access to God by being out in nature alone at night (97-98). In *The Lion on the Hearth*, the King family who abandons their family farm in the 1920s for a chance to make more money in the nearby city of Asheville, North Carolina, is confronted with the harsh realities of the natural world as they make a surprise visit home to discover that one of their relatives who had been left alone on a backwoods farm had passed away, with no one to care for him. In *The Winter People*, a rowdy bear hunting trip nearly turns fatal for the Young family. In *Last One Home*, Amanda King, whose husband removed her from her family farm to chase a brighter economic future in Asheville is rejuvenated by her occasional trips home and even keeps a young milch cow in the family’s small backyard in the 1930s. While all of these novels have a connection with the natural world, *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* most clearly and accurately interact with Terry Gifford’s six post-pastoral questions.

In Chapter 2, the discussion will focus on the first and second post-pastoral questions in terms of how Ehle's protagonists react to nature, either experiencing humility or horror, and connecting this discussion with discourses about the sublime in the natural world. In Chapter 3, the discussion of the third and fourth post-pastoral questions will illustrate how characters in *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* incorporate a respect for nature in connection with their personal identities. In Chapter 4, the discussion of the fifth and sixth post-pastoral questions through the lens of exploitation will demonstrate how some of John Ehle's characters are able to resist exploiting the landscape and the people around them. The following investigation of the post-pastoral in John Ehle's fiction highlights that the ability of Ehle's characters to find the "right relationship" with the natural world hinges on their humility, identity, and responsibility.

## Chapter 2: Humility & Horror: Responses to the Natural Sublime in Ehle's Fiction

*“Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?”*

*“What are the implications of recognizing that we are part of that creative destructive process that dominates the universe?”*

—Terry Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir* 31-32

John Muir, the Scottish-born Calvinist turned American preservationist who eventually founded the Sierra Club, “viewed every part of the natural world—floods and storms as much as anything else” with awe (Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir* 31). His admiration for the natural world came through in his writings, and according to Muir scholar Terry Gifford, Muir intended for the awe-inspiring natural world “to induce respect, humility, and ultimately inspire conservation in his readers” (*Reconnecting* 31). In discussing John Muir’s book *Our National Parks*, ecocritic Peter C. Remien suggests that Muir created “a work aimed at popularizing the nascent institution of the American national park” in which he speaks directly to his readers to tell them how much they will enjoy and be in awe of Yosemite National Park (824). Muir writes, “You are sure to be lost in wonder and praise . . . and every hair of your head will stand up and hum and sing like an enthusiastic

congregation” (qtd. in Remien 824). Remien also recognizes the preservationist impulse in Muir’s writing, arguing that Muir’s “gesturing beyond individual experience . . . displays wonder’s role in sponsoring broader preservationist concerns”—particularly, “the wish to preserve wonder-inspiring places for personal enjoyment” which “leads to a consideration of how others will experience places like Yosemite and Yellowstone” (824). Clearly for Muir, landscapes could inspire awe and wonder, and he hoped for his readers that this awe would then lead to humility and eventually conservation, a quest for the “right relationship” through the post-pastoral. In his writings about Yosemite, Muir was particularly interested in exposing individuals to the nation’s forests hoping to promote natural resource preservation, commenting that “the world needs the woods and is beginning to come to them” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 31). Gifford argues that for Muir, “humility based on awe was a first requirement to restrain the exploitation of natural resources” (*Reconnecting* 31). This connection between awe and humility is clearly evoked in the first post-pastoral question, “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 31).

Muir not only hoped that his readers would shed their hubris at the sight of awe-inspiring landscapes, but also that they would lose their preconceptions about the creative-destructive process that dominates the entire universe—the natural cycles of life and death. In a journal that he maintained as he walked down the East Coast to the Gulf of Mexico, Muir wrote, “On no subject, are our ideas more warped and pitiable than on death” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 32). Muir particularly lamented the fact that urban children were being raised without “the natural beauties of death” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 32). Muir prescribed the following remedy for this void: “let children walk with Nature, let them see

the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous and inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 32). As Terry Gifford describes, the second post-pastoral question, “What are the implications of recognizing that we are part of that creative-destructive process?” stems from “Muir’s preservationist drive” which sought “to provide our species with a directly experienced understanding of our own creative-destructive cycles that are linked to those cycles of growth and decay in nature” (*Reconnecting* 32).

A broader discussion of how these post-pastoral questions engage with interrelated topics in the environmental humanities, mainly within the study of the “natural sublime,” helps to understand the connection between nature and humility. The sublime “at its etymological heart, carries the long history of the relationship between human beings and those aspects of their world that excite in them particular emotions powerful enough to evoke transcendence, shock, awe, and terror” (Costelloe 2). Philosopher Emily Brady writes that the concept of the sublime is just as polarizing and varied as the emotions it can elicit. While some modern scholars deem the natural sublime “an outmoded concept tied to eighteenth-century experience or taste,” Brady argues that “the natural sublime, even in its metaphysical expression, is relevant for contemporary debates” (“Environmental Sublime” 177). A particularly interesting debate within the study of the sublime exists surrounding the supposition that “the sublime is inherently anthropocentric, especially given the hierarchical relationship...that sublime aesthetic experiences set up between humans and nature” (“Environmental Sublime” 177). Those who subscribe to the anthropocentric nature of the sublime claim that within this phenomena, “it is humanity that is valued rather than nature,



such that the sublime becomes both *self-regarding* and *human regarding*” (“Environmental Sublime” 177). Brady acknowledges that in this self-reflexive iteration, “the sublime could be seen as a type of aesthetic experience that both distorts and humanizes nature, degrading nature to our measure” (“Environmental Sublime” 178).<sup>9</sup>

Acclaimed environmental historian William Cronon has been quite critical of the sublime and its effects on the human mind. For Cronon, the natural sublime is not-so “natural” at all and in fact only serves to distance humans further from the environment around them. Cronon argues in his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to Wrong Nature,” that the sublime deepens the disconnect between people and planet as both the experience and understanding of the sublime subjugates the natural world, framing nature as the submissive “other” over which we as humans have control (69-90).<sup>10</sup> Brady acknowledges Cronon’s objections and those of other anthropocentric critics of the natural sublime, yet she maintains that there is a way to escape the anthropocentric view of the sublime, through humility: “it is possible to recognize the element of humility running through reflections on the sublime in nature, through which we feel insignificant in the face of powers that exceed us” (“Environmental Sublime” 179). Brady continues that “the natural sublime enables us to consider forms of appreciation in relation to more threatening or overwhelming natural qualities in nature” (“Environmental Sublime” 182). Much like John Muir, Brady views the natural sublime as having preservationist-prompting qualities as well,

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<sup>9</sup> For more on environmental aesthetics see Allen Carlson’s *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Art, Nature, and Architecture* and Carlson’s *Nature & Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics*, and *Environmental Aesthetics: Crossing Divides and Breaking Ground*, edited by Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz, and *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*, by Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott.

<sup>10</sup> Cronon also comments on the frontier’s impact in the formation of American understandings of the natural world, writing that the sublime and the frontier “converged to make wilderness in their own image, freighted it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day” (“The Trouble with Wilderness” 72).

writing: “The sublime potentially affords aesthetic responses that throw up epistemic value, too, in which we grasp nature as something that cannot be appropriated and something that, after all, deserves respect” (“Environmental Sublime” 182). The post-pastoral offers the opportunity for a revival of the natural sublime, one that can incorporate humility and might serve as a champion of the anthropocentric debate.

John Ehle’s novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* engage with the first and second post-pastoral questions and the anthropocentric debate surrounding the natural sublime.

Mooney Wright, in *The Land Breakers*, experiences first awe and then humility in the face of the landscape of the Appalachian wilderness of the 1780s. Mooney’s awe in connection with the natural world prompts him to limit his pride regarding his place in the environment and prompts him to conserve the landscape and the natural resources around him. Mooney helps neighboring settlers build small, sustainable cabins to increase their chance of survival in the mountains of North Carolina and to take only what they can use and use all that they take.<sup>11</sup>

Mooney Wright’s “wise use” impulses stem directly from the awe and humility he experiences in connection with the natural world. Unlike Mooney Wright, Weatherby Wright (Mooney’s grandson) experiences sheer terror in response to the natural world. In *The Road*, the natural sublime does not prompt humility for Weatherby Wright but instead elicits fear and causes Weatherby to become embittered towards the landscape around him. These polarizing reactions to and interactions between nature and human nature will be explored in greater detail in the following pages.

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 4, regarding responsibility in Ehle’s novels. I understand the post-pastoral as a series of graduated steps, each of which has the potential to lead people towards Muir’s ultimate goal of conservation, of reaching a right-relationship with the natural world. Mooney’s humility as explored in this chapter later inspires him to conserve and to respect the power and influence of the natural world.

**“The Mountain Wanted the Old Way Still”: Humility & Nature in *The Land Breakers***

In the 2014 re-release of John Ehle’s novel *The Land Breakers*, award-winning novelist and non-fiction writer Linda Spalding states that the text begins “in 1779 with a man and a woman, hungry and young” who have been walking down the spine of the Appalachian Mountains “for two or three years looking for land on which to make a home” (“Introduction” *The Land Breakers*, henceforth referred to as *Land*, vii). Spalding describes the landscape in which this young man and woman, Mooney and Imy Wright find themselves as one certainly possible of evoking the awe and terror inherent in the natural sublime, describing the nearby “mountain covered by trees and clouds and the narrow trails of ancient beasts” (“Introduction” *Land* viii). It is a place where “no person has ever made [a] settlement” and where nothing lives except “wolves and panthers, and a great, wanton bear” (“Introduction” *Land* viii). Although these circumstances could easily promote fear and bitterness toward the natural world, for Mooney Wright, the landscape caused him to shed his human hubris and take a humbled approach to the environment around him.

As Imy and Mooney Wright make their long journey from a life of indentured servitude in Philadelphia to owning a piece of land of their own in the mountains of western North Carolina, the pair is practicing the ancient pastoral tradition. Ecocritic and pastoral scholar Terry Gifford comments that the “pastoral” is “essentially a discourse of retreat which may . . . either simply *escape* from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, ‘our manners,’ or *explore* them” (*Pastoral* 99). In their retreat from being servants in a bustling city, Imy and Mooney Wright are not only searching for a departure from the hustle and bustle of urban life; they are also looking for a change in social status so that they themselves may own property rather than being essentially “owned” by the families for

which they have worked during their youth. John Ehle immediately complicates this pastoral narrative as he describes the rugged terrain that Imy and Mooney Wright encounter as they arrive in Morganton, North Carolina. Imy and Mooney “were interested” in the “blue wall” of mountains “rising from the hilly country” that they could see from town because “land was what they wanted, a place for a home” (Ehle, *Land* 11). But the pair quickly learn from others in town that “nobody lived up there . . . the wild animals owned it” (Ehle, *Land* 11). The mountains that held for Imy and Mooney Wright the possibility of an independent and peaceful life mirrored what the pair was looking for, within “the mountains themselves there was not a clearing, not a house, not a shed, and nobody except an occasional hunter ever entered that wild country” (Ehle, *Land* 11).

While there are certainly elements in this construction of the landscape that could have evoked terror and fear within Imy and Mooney, or even insecurity at the prospect of creating a settlement from the ground up, the pair’s desire to own land was so great, that they purchased a rugged mountain tract anyway. Ehle describes the Wrights’ previous attempts to own property to illustrate just how great their need to own a bit of land was. Ehle writes: “They had sought good land they could work on their own, but it wasn’t so easy to find. Many men had more than they needed, but they wouldn’t sell any of it. Mooney and Imy found nothing at all that was rich and promising” (*Land* 12). Ehle further elaborates that Mooney had become paranoid about the lack of financial success the couple was experiencing, connecting that to the need to buy land. When the pair lost a calf from their cow while making their journey south, Mooney blamed the “long road” for the cow’s weakness and miscarriage. Ehle writes that “Nothing had responded to them, and wouldn’t, Mooney said, until they had their own land” (*Land* 12).

Mooney's great desire to own land nearly overwhelms him when the couple wanders into a general store in Morganton and receive a generous offer. Perhaps noticing that Imy and Mooney looked road-tired and destitute, the shop owner begins talking with them, discussing the 1,000-acre plot of land up in the "blue wall" of mountains to the east of town that he owns and would be willing to sell (Ehle, *Land* 11). Imy discloses to the merchant how much money the pair has and he begins selecting the essential items the couple should purchase in order to survive in the mountains. After gathering for the couple a variety of tools and supplies, the shopkeeper "fell into contemplation again; then his fingers folded as his hands came together, and he said quietly, 'For the little money that's left, I'll sell you six hundred forty acres of bottomland'" (Ehle, *Land* 15). Ehle writes: "The answer burst out of Mooney, who for almost three years of wandering had sought a piece of land" (*Land* 15). Mooney hurriedly agreed to the deal, left the shop with the couple's new wares, and "sought fresh air, relief coming over him, and he sank down on the porch step and began to chuckle and shake his head" (Ehle, *Land* 15). Mooney was beside himself thinking of his new property, and kept repeating the conversation with the merchant in his head: "Good land, the storekeeper had said, river-bottom land" (Ehle, *Land* 15).

Mooney and Imy's immense elation over owning their own land infects them with the pride that John Muir warns us about. On the first night in their new landscape, the couple "lay in each other's arms near the fire and comforted one another, assured one another they had done right in this" (Ehle, *Land* 15). This desire to assure one another carried over into the following day as the pair continued hiking up the mountains toward their property "walking as fast as they could manage" (Ehle, *Land* 15). The couple's excitement regarding their new landscape transforms into exultation as the Wrights reach the summit of their climb.

Describing a scene nearly identical to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer about the Sea of Fog* (1817), Ehle writes that below Imy and Mooney "was a sea of clouds that covered the lowlands," they realized they "were above the clouds, above the world of Old Fort and Morganton, and doubtless of Virginia and Pennsylvania, too" (*Land* 16). This summit evoked the natural sublime in the couple, as Ehle describes:

They got caught up in exaltation, thinking about that, for it was all pretty as a picture and as fine as they had ever seen; they got to laughing and joking, hurling limbs and rocks down into the lowlands. They got to hugging each other, lost in pleasure to be up here and off to themselves, and they sank to the ground together and sought one another in this new place. (*Land* 16)

The transformative and transfixing natural sublime the pair encountered on the summit carried over into their emotions regarding their new life as they settled in for the night. Ehle writes that "the night came in on them and they felt close, felt like belonging here, as if they had won out at last over the various misfortunes and handicaps of life down there, way off in the lowlands" (*Land* 16). Imy and Mooney Wright, after experiencing the natural sublime, feel elevated geographically in their new mountain home and also socially elevated. Being high off in the mountains, the pair seem to conceive of themselves as not only better than their previous life of indentured servitude, but also better than those still trapped in the status quo of social hierarchies inherent in western society. The Wrights are not alone in their feeling of elevation on a wide variety of fronts. Cian Duffy in *Landscapes of the Sublime, 1700-1830* writes that mountain summits offered a similar paradigm shift in the as Europeans

“discovered” the Alpine sublime.<sup>12</sup> According to Duffy, the eighteenth century travel accounts about mountaineering in the Alps feature a “discourse of ascent,” a “discourse which links the physical ascent of mountains to a wide variety of ostensibly unrelated forms of elevation, moral, political, epistemological, etc.” (*Landscapes of the Sublime* 18). This “discourse of ascent” is present to some extent as Imy and Mooney Wright suggest that in their new mountain home they had finally “won out at last” over the “various misfortunes and handicaps of life down there, way off in the lowlands” (Ehle, *Land* 16), as the Wrights are connecting their current higher quality of life with their new high altitude.

Illustrating both the promise of the natural sublime and that of the post-pastoral, Ehle quickly robs his character of their summit-induced superiority complex. On the night following their mountaintop exhilaration, the landscape which Mooney previously described as “unknown, untampered with, left but lately by the savages,” quickly becomes closer and unwelcoming (Ehle, *Land* 11). As the pair settled down to sleep, the “stock was quiet; the dog was cozy and content” and as the night approached, “The darkness came on deeper; it seemed to be a deeper darkness than the lowlands knew” (Ehle, *Land* 16). The pair was immensely frightened as “sharply, quaveringly, came a long cry” and then “Another cry came from another way. It was a creature being tortured, sounded like” (Ehle, *Land* 16). This “current of cries began, a babble of screeches, screams, calls” and both Imy and Mooney Wright were “wide-eyed with wonder and she with fear, and maybe he with fear, for he had

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<sup>12</sup> A variety of sources exist on the transformative powers of mountains on the human mind. For a broad examination of natural sublime in European landscapes of mountains, rivers, and forests, see *Landscape and Memory* by Simon Schama. For a captivating text on mountaineering and mountaineering literature, see Robert Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*. Also see Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*, in which he describes how mountaineer W.H. Murray used his love of mountains to survive imprisonment in a WWII enemy camp. Murray began the manuscript for his book *Mountaineering in Scotland* while imprisoned in Libya, writing some of the best works of mountaineering literature on scraps of toilet tissue, unfortunately to have the collection confiscated before his liberation. Upon returning to the Scottish Highlands, Murray hiked to the summit of his favorite peak and began re-writing the text from memory.

never heard such terror-filled noise before” (Ehle, *Land* 16). In this moment, both Mooney and Imy Wright experience the darker side of the natural sublime, one in which the natural world inspires fear and terror rather than awe and wonder.<sup>13</sup> Ehle writes that the “night passed slowly,” that the Wrights “hoped for dawn and welcomed it” (*Land* 16).<sup>14</sup>

As dawn arrives, Mooney and Imy Wright emerge from their camp incredibly humbled, providing an affirmative answer to the first post-pastoral question and illustrating that as Emily Brady suggests, humility can, in fact, counteract some of the problematic theoretical issues surrounding the natural sublime (*The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* 79). On the morning after their fitful and terrifying night in the backwoods of early America, Imy communicates just how terrified she was the previous night, telling Mooney of the beasts from the night before, “I thought for a while they was going to come on in to congregate at our fire. They was none too welcome-sounding” (Ehle, *Land* 16). Mooney agrees with Imy about the threats inherent in their new environment and this understanding, this awe in the face of a natural environment prompts Mooney to question their entire mission. Mooney, standing beside Imy by the narrow road that would lead the couple back to the nearby settlement, as Ehle writes, “They could go on, or they could go back. If they went on into the mountain country, however, they might not find it easy to get out again” (*Land* 17).

Mooney’s humility in his landscape is evident as he wonders, “What did they expect to

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<sup>13</sup> This instance could also be characterized as a manifestation of Leo Marx’s complex pastoral, one in which the dangers and darkness inherent in a landscape appear to alter the idyllic depictions of the place, as described in the introductory chapter of this thesis. However, the transformation that Mooney encounters throughout the rest of the novel in reaction to his interactions with the natural world, as he goes from being humbled by the landscape to wanting to preserve it and his community, illustrates that *The Land Breakers* is indeed a post-pastoral work.

<sup>14</sup> Imy and Mooney Wright’s experience in the terrifying woods seems similar to William Bradford, leader of the Pilgrims’ view of North American nature during the group’s first winter in the new world (1620). Bradford writes that all around them the Pilgrims could see nothing “but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men” (95).



accomplish, after all? . . . Could they make a settlement back in there? How in the world could they get their crops to market?” (Ehle, *Land* 17). The Wrights are clearly not feeling as self-assured of their place in the world as they were while on the summit.

Nevertheless, at Imy’s request the couple travels on, and after a few more days, they arrive on their land, with a much more complicated and respectful conception of the land than they previously held. On their property the Wrights “could see mountains strewn in all directions, and it was awesome to consider the marvels and dens and torrents of this new country, to feel the loneliness of being here, yet at the same time the right of belonging here” (Ehle, *Land* 17). Recognizing the loneliness of the landscape shows a certain degree of humility that the couple did not express in previous interactions with the landscape.

However, there is some degree of hubris in Mooney’s relation to the world around him as he thinks “he and Imy were the only people, were the possessors of it. Not even the savage’s footprint was on the moss of the forest, not the sight or sound of another person was found anywhere” (Ehle, *Land* 17). While Mooney may own the deed to the land, he and Imy are not the sole humans using the landscape. As Donald E. Davis writes in *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians*, the Cherokee occupied massive hunting grounds throughout Southern Appalachia which they used to hunt and trap furs for sale in the burgeoning North American fur trade (67-69).<sup>15</sup> Just because Mooney did not lay eyes on a Cherokee, that does not mean they are completely absent, leaving Mooney the sole proprietor of the region. Similarly, Mooney expresses a highly anthropocentric view

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<sup>15</sup> I do not offer this objection to suggest that John Ehle is not sensitive to the rights and agency of native peoples. In fact, his non-fiction text *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation* offers a sympathetic and reverent view of the Cherokee. For more on the transformation of the Cherokee nation in reaction to the growing fur trade and other capitalistic endeavors, particularly the impact of those changes on the lives of Cherokee women, see Theda Perdue’s *Cherokee Women*.

in his statement that: “This is the land of the wolf and the bear, the panther, the snake, the eagle high above them, the buzzards following them—or so it had been since they arrived” meaning that now this was the land of man, in particular, the land of the Wrights (Ehle, *Land* 17).

Unfortunately for Mooney Wright, it takes losing Imy for him to fully shed his proud reaction to the natural world. After finally arriving on their own land, Mooney sets to work building the couple a cabin. Imy worked right along with Mooney as Ehle describes the couple hauling rocks from the river to the home site to build a chimney, chinking in between them “with small stones and sticks and handfuls of clay” (*Land* 22). Even though “The rocks cut their hands and the clay shriveled on their skins,” the pair “stayed with the work until it was done” (Ehle, *Land* 22). While both Imy and Mooney were exhausted from this back-breaking work, Mooney began to realize that after a while: “Imy was weaker than he had ever seen her. She was drained to a softness, had wilted even to the eye” (Ehle, *Land* 22). Mooney becomes deeply worried about Imy’s condition, especially when he sees her “stop in the woods when she didn’t know he was about and stand resting, as if wondering about her weariness, and he was awakened one night by her coughing and restlessness” (Ehle, *Land* 22). Mooney hurriedly finishes the couple’s cabin, bringing Imy inside to provide her better shelter and comfort her beside the new home’s hearth. Yet, “as the nights grew more chilly,” Imy “coughed all the more” (Ehle, *Land* 23). Fearing that the night air was the culprit of Imy’s illness, Mooney, “chinked the house so tightly that little light could be seen through the walls” but even still, “the night air always seemed to reach her” (Ehle, *Land* 23). The continued deterioration of Imy’s condition clearly strips the *The Land Breakers* of any subliminal “discourse of assent” regarding the couple’s increased quality of life in the

mountains. Ironically, it is the high altitude mountain air, an inescapable component of any mountain environment, that Mooney identifies as the cause of Imy's discomfort and his own growing despair.

Mooney's fear of the mountain air grows as he hypothesizes that Imy "helped him too much" in clearing and burning brush on their land. He considers, "maybe that was it, that in the brush smoke had been the pained spirit of this place, and it had got inside her and was expanding outward, smoldering, stifling her" (Ehle, *Land* 24). Mooney further blames the wood smoke for "stealing" Imy "away from him at the start of their work and adventure" (Ehle, *Land* 24). Mooney realized: "He was losing her, the body and presence and affection of her, and there was no one else in the place or in his life" (Ehle, *Land* 24). Clearly the loss of his partner negatively impacts Mooney's perception of the landscape. No longer does the mountain offer him awe or exaltation nor temporary fear, but instead the mountain environment brought about a long-lasting grief that is much harder to escape than any fleeting by-product of the natural sublime. No longer is the Wright plot of land a place for a bright family future, instead, Mooney now places blame upon the place itself for the difficulties he and Imy encountered. It is clear that the Wrights no longer feel as though they have "won out at last over the various misfortunes" of life in other regions, as they once proudly exclaimed while on top of the mountain (Ehle, *Land* 12).

Mooney's dramatic transformation from one who was exhilarated on a mountaintop, to terrified by the forest's nightly chorus, to recognizing himself as but a mere part of the mountain world and all of its processes, is incredibly apparent and he stands over Imy's hillside grave. Even knowing that "Imy would not want him to be so low, would tell him if she could, to climb out of the hole and stand straight above it," Mooney could not help

himself from contemplating all the he had lost, all that mountain had cost him (Ehle, *Land* 37). Mooney knew “there would be no more touching her . . . no more seeing her by the fire, no more holding her of a night” (Ehle, *Land* 37). As “the dirt was closing over her,” Mooney realized he was not above the world around him, that the mountain had a say in his destiny. Humbly, Mooney acknowledges, “the mountain had received them with noisy challenges and now had taken her” (Ehle, *Land* 37). In this scene, Mooney affords the natural world much more agency than before, an admission he is only capable of due to his newfound humility, as he thinks: “The mountain had wanted the old way still, and he who changes what is ordered and old and set is a man who grasps the lion’s jaw” (Ehle, *Land* 37).

In *The Land Breakers*, Mooney and Imy Wright display the wide range of emotions often associated with the natural sublime. At the realization that they had purchased their own land high in the North Carolina mountains, the pair are immensely excited. As they look out from the mountain summit, they experience the natural sublime’s typical feelings of excitement and transcendence. Yet, as Mooney is forced to confront Imy’s untimely death, he sheds his pride in order to adopt a humbled and cautious approach to the landscape around him. This incorporation of humility into the sublime, as suggested by Emily Brady, involves feeling “insignificant in the face of the powers that exceed us” and can then be employed to promote environmental conservation (“Environmental Sublime” 179). In *The Land Breakers*, Ehle shows readers the possibility of developing awe in the face of nature to humility, as Mooney must come to understand that his life and the life and death of his wife are intimately connected to the creative-destructive processes that dominate the entire universe. Mooney’s humility stems from the awe and fear the landscape provoked and from his understanding that neither he nor his wife could escape the natural world. As will be explored

more in the following chapters, Mooney's humility in the face of the mountain world and his understanding of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and all its inhabitants, make him a better steward of the earth, and set him on the path to finding a "right relationship" with the natural world.

### **"The Mountain Has Identified Me": Horror in *The Road***

In his review of the 1998 re-release of John Ehle's novel *The Road*, historian John C. Hennen, writes that "the novel's hero, the visionary engineer Weatherby Wright, burns with the fire of the missionary capitalist, determined to blast the people of his native western North Carolina mountains into the realm of industrial enlightenment" (199). Hennen elaborates that Weatherby's "zeal, which defines him as a land-locked equivalent of Captain Ahab, eventually reshapes the five-thousand-foot mountain" that stands on the railroad's location. Much like Captain Ahab, Weatherby does not complete his mission unscathed. As Hennen writes, "Weatherby's own spirit is broken by a series of horrific episodes (the most frightening was his entrapment in a rattler-infested cave)" (199). Hennen comments that *The Road* leaves readers wondering what was the root cause of Weatherby's emotional conflict with the Road, "was it Weatherby's failure to turn loose of his compulsion [to complete the Road] in spite of his growing, horrible realization that he was consciously alienating himself from the natural bonds that gave force and meaning to his existence?" (203). The following pages will examine Weatherby's horrific encounters with the natural world, which extend from his inability to shed his own pride and continually remind him that he is viscerally connected to the mountain environment's creative-destructive processes.

John Ehle's *The Road*, set in 1876, features several scenes where protagonist Weatherby Wright is terrified and traumatized by his interactions with the rugged mountain

landscape of western North Carolina. Weatherby Wright, a native of the region, spent most of his adult life making a name for himself as a railroad builder in other segments of the American South. As the novel begins, Wright has returned to his mountain home in order to open up the seemingly isolated “mountain world” to commerce and trade with other regions.<sup>16</sup> While Weatherby has lofty goals, his opposition to the natural world shows that even an accomplished man, one of wealth and means, is no match for the mountains, especially not Sow Mountain, “the mountain on whose body” Weatherby and his men “were to work” (Ehle, *The Road* henceforth referred to as *Road* 3). In the process of putting a railroad on the back of Sow Mountain and creating a tunnel through the mountain, Weatherby perpetually questions his own place and power within the mountain landscape and the entire universe.

As Weatherby confronts the numerous challenges associated with building a railroad in the mountains, he is horrified by what he perceives of as the mountain’s cruelty. Weatherby Wright certainly encounters the natural sublime while high up on Sow Mountain, but rather than experiencing awe, he is privy only to the horrific and terrifying components of the phenomena. As will be explored below, Weatherby epitomizes the problematic and anthropocentric natural sublime. Emily Brady describes this version of the sublime as existing when “it is humanity that is valued rather than nature, such that the sublime becomes both *self-regarding* and *human regarding*” (“Environmental Sublime” 177). Weatherby’s conflicts with the environment in *The Road* epitomize a use of the sublime as “a type of aesthetic experience that both distorts and humanizes nature, degrading nature to our

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<sup>16</sup> Since the novel’s 1967 release there has been a healthy amount of debate regarding Appalachian economic and geographic isolation. See Wilma Dunaway’s, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860*, for a worlds-system analysis model to illustrate the early capitalistic impulses and trade networks within the Appalachian region prior to the Civil War.

measure” (“Environmental Sublime” 178). Weatherby Wright literally humanizes nature, frequently referring to Sow Mountain as “old woman.” By humanizing the natural world in name, and attributing female qualities to it, Weatherby understands Sow Mountain as a bitter old woman, one who is a willing and ready opponent to his goals.<sup>17</sup>

Weatherby’s tendency to humanize nature is even present at his first encounter with Sow Mountain. As Weatherby “turned to look up at the side of the mountain” at the beginning of the novel, he “wondered, feeling strange at the thought, if the mountain was as lonely and forlorn as he, and felt humble as he, here at the beginning of the enterprise” (Ehle, *Road* 14). Weatherby was struck by the sheer size of Sow Mountain, one that John Ehle describes as a “massive monolith of earth, rock, vegetation, and water” reaching “two thirds of a mile tall” (*Road* 3). Weatherby continues to illustrate his impulse to humanize the landscape in his first encounter with Sow Mountain as he wonders, “Could a mountain feel pain?” (Ehle, *Road* 14). Weatherby, thinking of the mountain and the work his men had begun, wonders:

When men came with axes and cut at her, did she know it? When men bled her with picks and shovels, did she know it? When men severed the arteries of her body and gorged out new ones, did she feel the sharp pain, did her huge body respond with fever or with anguish? (Ehle, *Road* 14)

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<sup>17</sup> It should also be mentioned that Weatherby Wright not only humanizes Sow Mountain, but feminizes it. As this section illustrates, when addressing this particular component of the landscape, Weatherby Wright continually refers to the mountain as “old woman” and with feminine pronouns “she” and “her.” This conceptualization of nature makes for an interesting comparison with Ynestra King’s widely cited definition of ecofeminist principles, the first of which is that “The building of Western industrial civilization in opposition to nature interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature. Therefore, ecofeminists take on the life-struggles of all of nature as our own” (King 151).

In this pondering Weatherby seems to understand just how massive of an undertaking that building a railroad truly is. He is aware that his work has set him against a gargantuan mound of stone, plant growth, and dirt. But by humanizing Sow Mountain in thinking of “her,” Weatherby is also creating an opponent that he feels more equipped to combat. Weatherby addresses his opponent at the opening of *The Road* by saying, “‘Old woman,’ he whispered, ‘I mean you no harm,’” and “‘Old woman,’ he whispered, ‘are you ready to begin?’” (*Road* 15, 18).

Weatherby Wright took a delayed approach towards beginning the road’s construction, a behavior which may have a hint of awe for the mountain landscape. Although Weatherby arrives at the road in early September 1876, he waits another month to advance the road over the mountain, waiting for the leaves to fall off the mountain’s trees so that he “can mark the route” of the future road “more clearly and set it once and for all” (Ehle, *Road* 20). Perhaps Weatherby had some sort of attachment to autumn in Appalachia, a period of vibrant leaves that brings millions of tourists to the region in modern times.<sup>18</sup> Whether or not Weatherby was in awe of the majesty of fall in the North Carolina Mountains, the work along the Road did eventually commence, but Ehle carefully notes that the work progressed quite slowly at first. In October 1876, Weatherby and a select group of workers spent an entire day “marking the route on the lower shoulders of the mountain, through the watery, virgin land” (Ehle, *Road* 23). Ehle comments that Weatherby and his men proceeded with the construction of the road quite slowly, that: “They had begun to move in sympathy with the labor they were doing, like a woman drugged by pain during childbirth” (Ehle, *Road* 45).

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<sup>18</sup> According to the National Park Service, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park that extends from Cherokee, North Carolina to Gatlinburg, Tennessee in the Southern Appalachians hosted more than 11.3 million visitors in 2016 alone, making it the most highly visited of all 59 national parks within the federal system (“Park Statistics”).



Again, Weatherby's humanization of the mountain created for him an opponent that he could recognize, one that he thought would more easily serve his own mission. This comparison of the slow and laborious work along the road to childbirth again reveals that Weatherby views the mountain as female. This view connects to ecofeminist theory as Ynestra King suggests that the construction of western society "reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature" (151).

Weatherby's cautious work ethic could also be attributed to his apprehension regarding the feasibility of the entire project. When his foreman, Cumberland, asks Weatherby "How long has it been known that a road could be put up the mountain?" Weatherby replies that "Nobody knows that it can be" (Ehle, *Road* 20). Ehle reveals to readers that although Weatherby was the surveyor who determined that a railroad could be built along Sow Mountain, Weatherby admits, "sometimes I'm wrong" (*Road* 20). Cumberland, a young, ambitious man in his early thirties who was still determined to make a name for himself, quickly tried to warn Weatherby of the gravity of the situation, saying to him, "If you're wrong, all the work of bringing the Road to the mountain will have been wasted" (Ehle, *Road* 20). Weatherby quickly replies, "Not entirely. But it has been a gamble, amounting to millions of dollars; it has bled this poor state" (Ehle, *Road* 20).<sup>19</sup> Weatherby is aware that the state of North Carolina has already invested a large amount of time and money in the road, all of which contributes to the "zeal" that reviewer John Hennen describes in Weatherby (199). Given the vast quantity of resources invested in the burgeoning railroad, Weatherby is keenly aware of the intensity of his challenge to build the road on and through Sow Mountain.

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<sup>19</sup> For a rich history of the railroad's construction in Appalachian North Carolina, including estimated costs, see Cary Franklin Poole's *A History of Railroading in North Carolina* (Cary F. Poole, 1995).

Already anxious about the burden of building the road, Weatherby finds himself first horrified by the natural world during his first major accident along the road. In June 1877, Weatherby's digging crew "reported an unusual occurrence at a cut in the mountain" (Ehle, *Road* 67). His team discovers that the "mountain has surprises," as they find that: "The earth, when dug away, revealed a soft rock, which, when torn away, revealed a bed of white mud" (Ehle, *Road* 69, 67). While Weatherby's team was quick to concede that this layer of white mud "was easy to shovel into the carts and haul off," unfortunately for the digging crew, "there seemed to be no bottom to it," as each time a shovel-load of the clay was removed, a brand new patch would seep in to replace it (Ehle, *Road* 67). Weatherby noticed that "for some reason, the mules and oxen didn't want to wade into" the clay, which deeply troubled him because these animals were otherwise well-accustomed to working in a variety of conditions along the road. Ehle writes that Weatherby "sensed a clammy chill" come over him while being around the road and its oozing white clay (*Road* 67). The appearance of this non-solid layer within Sow Mountain befuddled Weatherby, but rather than investigating the matter or seeking some other expertise on the scenario, he stubbornly tells his men that "he didn't know what to do, except to dig it out" (Ehle, *Road* 67). This surprise layer embedded within the mountain clearly worried Weatherby, an experienced builder and surveyor, who was now crossing uncharted territory.

The road's strange, new path emotionally and physically drained Weatherby, who after a full day's work alongside his men removing the clay from the mountain cut, "admitted to Babcock," one of his team leaders that "he needed sleep himself. He said he hadn't realized, until the cut was clear, how deeply he had feared failing here" (Ehle, *Road* 68). The road and the muddy, clay-filled cut had been haunting Weatherby's dreams as well, as Ehle

writes that Weatherby “realized he had been dreaming about this mud cut” (*Road* 67). After a sleepless night haunted by nightmares about the white clay, Weatherby took an excursion into the mud itself and was horrified as the soupy, sticky earth attempted to swallow him: “He waded into the mud. He sank in into his knees. He waded on farther and sank to his thighs” (Ehle, *Road* 67-68). This process was undoubtedly terrifying for the man who was charged with quite literally moving a mountain. Ehle elaborates that Weatherby “told himself it was foolish to go on, but he was bound to do so, even when the mud came up around his waist and sucked at his body. It was as if the cut would take him in, if it could, would swallow him” (*Road* 68). The emergence of the clay within Sow Mountain scared Weatherby and made him consider the strong possibility that his survey could have been incorrect, that perhaps the road along Sow Mountain was not feasible at all. In this encounter, Weatherby was undoubtedly wondering if he could walk back to camp, much less complete the road itself.

The road’s feasibility seemed even more unlikely after the mountain claimed its first victims, the steam engine called “Mud Digger” and its engineer, a man named Bolton. Weatherby insisted that Bolton haul the Mud Digger engine up to the mountain cut, in order to assist the men in removing the clay. While Weatherby and his foreman Babcock camped nearby after a full day of removing Clay from the road, they awakened to an awful sound and an even more horrible reality: “sometime during the night a snap sounded, a shot, and explosion” (Ehle, *Road* 70). Thinking that the noise was a natural source, the “men were on their feet at once, turning to the woods to meet whatever enemy was attacking” only to realize “there was no threat from the woods” (Ehle, *Road* 70). The men looked on with horror as they “saw that the engine, on its side, was rising. It was rising as if it were breathing

. . . The track, even as they watched, was being twisted and sucked into the clay. The clay was undulating and the engine was rising as the clay breathed and heaved” (Ehle, *Road* 70). The mountain was claiming her first sacrifice, swallowing the Mud Digger engine and the engineer Bolton who was sleeping inside.

In this scene, as they saw the mountain suck the engine and its engineer into the mountain’s muddy body, Weatherby and his men experienced the negative side effects of the natural sublime, namely horror and terror. Weatherby watched as “The terrified face of Bolton appeared at the cab window. He cried a lonely sound without words, begging for instructions . . . the engine was sinking into the mud even as Bolton crawled onto the side of it” (Ehle, *Road* 70-71). Weatherby made a feeble attempt to help Bolton, offering him a large piece of lumber to hold onto as the engine sank into the earth. As Weatherby wades into the mud toward Bolton, hoping to carry him out of the mud and into safety, “The mountain moved. He looked up to see the hillside sliding toward him, hurling trees and rocks. Desperately he fled, and behind him Babcock was shouting and Bolton was screaming, and trees were breaking and rocks crashing as the earth rolled down” (Ehle, *Road* 71). When the rest of the workers arrive the following morning, “they found Weatherby standing before the 450-foot-long mound of earth and rock in which his engine and engineer lay buried. His own clothes were covered with white mud, but there was also no more white mud in sight now. Down in the womb of that mound of earth, rock and tree trunks, where the engine lay was the mud. Under it all was where Bolton lay, too” (Ehle, *Road* 71). Weatherby’s horror and bitterness towards the landscape after this ordeal is apparent the following morning as Weatherby stood in front of the earthen grave. He realized that the entire ordeal “was all rooted in natural causes” yet, “at the same time, he attributed it to the personality of the

mountain itself, to the harshness of her attitude” (Ehle, *Road* 7). In this scene, Weatherby once again attributed human qualities to the natural world, misrepresenting “natural causes” as the human impulses for viciousness and revenge. Weatherby’s aggressive attitude toward the environment around him increases as the novel progresses, making him even more bitter towards the landscape and landing him in even more terrifying encounters with the “mountain world.”

This ordeal also forces Weatherby to realize and acknowledge his connection with the mountain. Weatherby is confronted with the fact that that he and his men were intimately connected to the creative, destructive processes, such as life and death, growth and decay, that dominate the mountain and in fact the entire natural world. As Weatherby stands before the site where he last saw Bolton alive, he thinks, “One mouth of the mountain was white mud . . . and through that mouth it had taken the engine and the cars and the track and the engineer. It was clear what the personality of this mountain was and what sort of methods she would choose” (Ehle, *Road* 72). In this moment, while still humanizing the mountain “herself,” Weatherby realizes that his own self-interest and goals for finishing the road will be compromised by the whims and processes of the mountain; that ultimately, “she would choose” (Ehle, *Road* 72). Weatherby’s recognition that “she would choose,” meaning that the mountain had more agency and influence over the creation of the road than he previously realized, is perhaps a way to defer his own responsibility for the horrific losses along the road. For example, if Weatherby had not insisted on hauling the Mud Digger engine up the road to haul out excess mud, the engine and engineer would still be standing on solid ground. By blaming the mountain “herself,” Weatherby seems to have found an outlet for his own displaced guilt.

Unlike *The Land Breakers*' Mooney Wright who eventually transforms his awe and fear of the natural world into respect and humility for the environment, Weatherby Wright continues to be terrified by the mountain as he builds the road without changing his plan of action. Rather than being first in awe of the natural world and then converting that awe into humility, throughout *The Road*, Weatherby is repeatedly horrified by Sow Mountain, realizing that the mountain herself, the "old woman," has control over him and his project, that his own goals are not the sole deciding factor for the road's progress. As reviewer John Hennen suggests, the "most frightening" ordeal for Weatherby "was his entrapment in a rattler-infested cave" (199). In mid-December 1877, Weatherby ventured away from his post at the main camp to check on the Long Bridge tunnel, one that was rumored to be creeping with mountain soil and water seeping in, meaning the entire tunnel was on the brink of collapse. As Weatherby ambles up Mud Cut: "his foot slipped and he fell. He grabbed a laurel trunk, but his hand failed to hold onto it, and he fell into a ten-foot ravine. It wasn't a dangerous fall, but he knew even as he landed that he had injured himself" (Ehle, *Road* 174-175). Weatherby laid in agony for several hours, "he began to admit to himself that nobody had sent out a search party to find him, that no one at the camp knew he was even lost. And they might not know for a day or so" (Ehle, *Road* 175). As Weatherby was trapped within the mountain, the traumatic effects of the natural sublime are incredibly apparent, as Ehle writes:

his body aching from the rock bed, and from the cold, and from the wound and from his fears, which were more acute now than before. He had never before considered his own death, but he knew the mountain world well enough to know he was caught in one of its conspiracies. (*Road* 179-180)

In this moment of agony and self-reflection, Weatherby also realizes that he cannot

escape the mountain, that he is in no way separate from the processes of life and death that dominate the natural world. Weatherby thinks to himself, “Just as a spiderweb traps an insect or a laurel slick traps a wanderer, there were nets and traps for the mountain man, too” (Ehle, *Road* 180). While brooding on this trap, Weatherby concludes that he is partially responsible his circumstances, but that there are elements of the mountain’s plan for him that have not yet become apparent:

in his mind was the thought, cyclically recurring, that the mountain knew he was there and had planned all of this. He was himself a maker of plans, and he could recognize a plan made by another; he could identify facets of the plan that had fallen into place, and he supposed other facets would fall into place, that the plan was not fully revealed yet . . . this was an impersonal, intricate, complete plan, founded on a natural sense of balance and justice. It was more like a plan he would make.

(Ehle, *Road* 180)

In this passage and throughout *The Road*, Weatherby Wright’s depiction and conception of Sow Mountain as an “old woman” reveals his use of the anthropocentric sublime wherein “humanity is valued rather than nature” (“Environmental Sublime” 177). In the passage above, Weatherby is once again humanizing the mountain, affording the landscape human qualities that he thinks help him understand the environment. When faced with the sheer power of the mountain around him, Weatherby emphasizes and places value on the human impulses to “conspire” and “plan,” rather than developing any sort of awe or humility from his interactions with the landscape. For Weatherby, his accident of is one of the mountain’s “conspiracies.” Yet in deeming it “more like a plan he would make,” Weatherby is expressing the “*self-regarding*” and “*human regarding*” sublime as discussed by Emily

Brady (“Environmental Sublime” 177). By describing his entrapment as “a plan he would make,” Weatherby is anthropomorphizing the mountain in order to understand his place in the landscape. Weatherby’s emphasis that his fall into the mountain is not a mere accident but a “conspiracy” and a “plan” points to his impulse to value humanity and its social constructs rather than the natural world. By viewing his entrapment in the mountain as a conniving plot twist from a pernicious human opponent, Weatherby is placing value on human thought rather than the interconnected system of life and death that dominates the mountain world.

While lying trapped within Sow Mountain, Weatherby continues to converse with the mountain he was becoming increasingly embittered towards, finding himself calling out in pain to Sow Mountain herself: “‘You have my leg, don’t you woman?’ he said to the mountain. ‘You have my leg in your jaw’” (Ehle, *Road* 181). Weatherby’s thoughts on Sow Mountain turn even darker, even more bitter as he thinks, “No . . . she has me, all of me in her open mouth, and she will eat me alive if she can” (Ehle, *Road* 181).<sup>20</sup> Weatherby views the mountain as a plotting, vindictive woman who “Since Mud Cut . . . had waited so quietly, he thought, ignoring the work on the bridges, tunnels, cuts, embankments, camps; then with one single move she crippled it all” (Ehle, *Road* 181). As he lies in agony, Weatherby recognizes that he is connected to the processes of life and death that dominate the universe.

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<sup>20</sup> This passage where Weatherby suggests the mountain has his leg in her jaw makes another interesting connection between Ehle’s fiction and ecofeminism. In *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Karen J. Warren describes that ecofeminists “claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (1). In this passage, Weatherby is suggesting that the mountain’s possession of his leg, “in her jaw” is an animal-like behavior. Warren suggests that the subjugation of nature and “otherness” of the environment in western societies extends to animals and nonhuman, writing: “According to ecofeminists, ‘nature’ (referring to nonhuman animals, plants, and ecosystems) is included among those Others who/that have been unjustifiably exploited and dominated” (1). Ehle’s description of the mountain as an animal illustrates this exploitation and domination of the landscape.



That inescapable connection becomes even clearer as he realizes a den of rattlesnakes are lurking close to him within his mountain trap:

if he was in the mountain, he thought, then the tongue of the mouth was awakening now. The sun was rising and more and more light warmth would come into this place; the snakes would awaken, the membrane of the walls would awaken, the threads of the web would awaken. (Ehle, *Road* 181)

As the nearby rattlesnakes do in fact awaken and approach Weatherby, he concedes that the matter of his own death is not up to him, but is instead at the whim of the mountain herself:

Death would take him when the mountain decided, he thought grimly, when she was hungry for him. He couldn't even hope for mercy. There was no way to discuss anything with her or compromise. What could he say to the walls of the mouth that would devour him? (Ehle, *Road* 182)

Surprisingly, Weatherby does survive his traumatic rattlesnake-infested entrapment within Sow Mountain; however, he does not escape this encounter unscathed. After being rescued, Weatherby's "dreams troubled him" (Ehle, *Road* 191) even while recovering in his comfortable home with his doting wife Mildred, devotedly nursing him back to health. Ehle describes that Weatherby's dreams "always recalled the work he had been doing on the mountain, and they were always about death. The death was of his workers and his friends . . . and sometimes was his own" (*Road* 191-192). Ehle is careful to illuminate that these death-laden dreams are a new development for Weatherby, that before his terrifying encounters with the road and Sow Mountain, the project held a much different meaning for him: "Before now the Road and life had been related; now the Road and death. He couldn't think of one without thinking of the other. So when men came to talk with him about the Road, he felt a

heaviness kin to despair” (*Road* 192). Weatherby clearly recognizes his own connection with the landscape around him, that the landscape has changed the way he thought about his own work, has even invaded his dreams with negative thoughts about his progress along the road. Weatherby, in fact, no longer conceives of the road as a road at all, but he instead understood that: “The Road itself was a snake, the track its backbone, its body stretched across the hills and rivers and ravines” (Ehle, *Road* 192). This paradigm shift illustrates how intimately connected the road and the mountain are in Weatherby’s mind, in that an inanimate object, the road, is to Weatherby, a living, breathing, terrifying creature that occupies the mountain and is perpetually prepared to strike him.

The painful effects of Weatherby’s encounters with the natural sublime are apparent in his recovery as well, as his doctor suggest that he, “came close to dying up there” on the mountain in the snake-infested cave, prompting Weatherby to think to himself, “I did die in one respect” (Ehle, *Road* 192). This admission is clearly an example of the trauma and horror Weatherby encountered in the natural world. Ehle also makes it clear that the road has affected Weatherby’s foreman and right-hand man, Cumberland in dramatic and terrifying ways as well. During a sleepless night, worrying about the road, Cumberland confides in Weatherby that he wakes at night, realizing he is in agony, because he “can’t see a way out” (Ehle, *Road* 201). Cumberland worries because he and Weatherby “have brought a road onto a mountain” that he is now “not sure” they “can climb” (Ehle, *Road* 201). To this admission of fear, Weatherby quickly replies, “it’s the mountain all right, she’s the problem” (Ehle, *Road* 201). Once again Weatherby is humanizing the mountain in order to make it easier to

cope with, to conceivably form an easier opponent to defeat.<sup>21</sup> Although this conversation and the anthropocentric approach to the natural sublime are problematic (arguably because nature is indifferent to man, rather than vindictive), it does illustrate that both Weatherby and Cumberland have been horrified by their experiences along the road.

In his conversation with Cumberland, Weatherby shares his interpretation of the human vs. nature conflict along the road, a narrative that shows his inability to change his plan of action regarding the railroad. Weatherby shares with Cumberland: “When a man goes about changing nature he set off her response, and a chain reaction is set in motion which defeats him, unless, of course, he is adequately prepared” (Ehle, *Road* 202). This conversation points to Weatherby’s inability to understand that there could be implications to his realization that he is so intimately connected to the mountain world. If, for example, Weatherby experienced awe in the face of the mountain landscape rather than fear, he could, much like Mooney Wright, find a “right relationship” with his home. When Cumberland questions Weatherby on just what it is he wants to do about his mission along the road, Weatherby replies, “I want to be done with it. I want it over. I want to be free of it. If they were to say to me, ‘Very well, don’t build it,’ then I would be relieved and free” (Ehle, *Road* 202). This seems like a healthy, responsible approach to the road, but Weatherby quickly backtracks, once again illustrating his obsessive zeal for the project, saying: “I can’t desert it, even though I realize I’m engaging myself in a death challenge. The place and I will die

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<sup>21</sup> Weatherby’s idea that the feminized mountain landscape is “the problem” with his progress along the road, connects to ecofeminism as described by Karen Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*: “nature is a feminist issue” and that phrase could easily “be called the slogan of ecofeminism” (1). Warren elaborates that “something is a ‘feminist issue’ if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression, subordination, or domination of women” (1). By claiming that the mountain is like a spiteful woman, Weatherby’s illustrates the connection between the domination of a landscape and the domination of women. There are several instances of connections between Ehle’s fiction and ecofeminist theory in both *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*.

somewhat, to some extent; death will track me down again, all right, try to get me back into its cave. And that cave comes in many forms” (Ehle, *Road* 202). Here Weatherby refuses to find a “right relationship” with his natural home, which is an outcome that Gifford suggests that the post-pastoral offers us. Although Weatherby initially suggests he would like to abandon the road, it is clear that he does not see that as an option.

Instead, Weatherby remains trapped, conceiving of himself as Sow Mountain’s primary target, and her main opponent. After Weatherby was rescued from the snake-infested bowels of Sow Mountain, he could not bring himself to enter any of the road’s many tunnels, as they reminded him far too much of the cave from which he nearly did not emerge. Ehle describes that “whenever Weatherby came near a tunnel, he would stand like a man possessed, a sweat appearing on his flesh” (Ehle, *Road* 202). Standing before these tunnels, not even able to walk inside, Weatherby is afflicted with paralyzing fear in the face of the mountain landscape, illustrating how horrific the natural sublime is for Weatherby. Ehle writes that the encounters with Sow Mountain have been the most trying times of Weatherby’s life: “Three times in his adult life had he been afraid: first, at Mud Cut, when he awoke and the mountain was shifting; second, inside the cave; and third, here, when he realized he could not move into the tunnel he made other men enter” (*Road* 202). While it is clear that Weatherby is afraid of Sow Mountain, his conception of himself as her sole target and victim prevents him from healing his relationship with world around him. Weatherby, standing in a wretched state, experiencing intense fear, in front of one of the road’s many tunnels, shares with Cumberland his perspective, “the mountain has identified me . . . her first affront was to Bolton, but . . . she later came to realize it wasn’t the driver of the engine at all, but the chief maker of the Road who must be got rid of” (Ehle, *Road* 204). Once again,

it is clear that Weatherby is terrified of the landscape around him and understands his own connection to the creative-destructive process of life and death that dominates the mountain world. Yet despite this knowledge, Weatherby fails to employ this understanding to heal his relationship with his natural home, a shortcoming that brings about dramatic and even fatal consequences.

Weatherby's refusal to recognize the implications of his relationship with Sow Mountain prevents him from taking a more responsible approach to the road's construction. Because Weatherby remains bent on completing the road, his business-as-usual policy results in a tunnel cave-in and the subsequent death of more than twenty of his workers, an accident that prompts him to declare, "I am a casualty along the way. I can't even bring myself to ride on a train . . . I won't ride one of them, the Road broke me so bad" (Ehle, *Road* 392). In late November 1878, the men working outside of the Swannanoa Tunnel along the road "heard a rumble, as if the earth itself were clearing its throat" (Ehle, *Road* 265-66). This rumble was the tunnel itself caving in, closing off its exit, trapping forty men and forty mules inside. When Weatherby arrives at the scene of the accident, one of his most skilled and productive workers, Moses, warns him, "You can't build it now . . . You'll lose it all" (Ehle, *Road* 273). Weatherby walks away from Moses, stubbornly thinking, "he could win out if his losses were no greater than he now felt them to be: four men dead and a day and a half of work lost" (Ehle, *Road* 274). Unfortunately, the losses from the Swannanoa tunnel were much greater, with more than twenty men dead. Weatherby again feels his inescapable connection with death and Sow Mountain as he hobbles around the scene of the accident, his left leg still healing from his fall into the mountain ravine, "breathing deeply . . . from the emotional pain he felt, lifting the dead who had died inside the tunnels, where he had sent them, where he

couldn't go himself" (Ehle, *Road* 276). While Weatherby does acknowledge that he had sent these men into the tunnel from which they did not emerge alive, he diffuses his own responsibility in the matter as soon as he has the chance. When the local doctor arrives on the scene of the accident, with death toll already up to twelve, Weatherby informs him that it is once again the mountain's fault for the human pain and suffering along the road:

"She's cruel, doctor. She's got a bite on her. She's mean. It's no challenge to see that men are dead, once she kills them" (Ehle, *Road* 276). Weatherby's refusal to accept responsibility for his actions keeps him from being humbled in the face of the landscape and instead prompts him to be horrified by the accidents on the road. While he is frequently terrified in his encounters with the mountain along the road, while he realizes the interconnectedness of life and death in the natural world and his own life, Weatherby is not capable of employing that knowledge to improve his own life, or even to save the lives of those around him.

In the final pages of *The Road*, Weatherby Wright's inability to heal his relationship with his natural home is painfully clear. Ehle reveals to readers that Weatherby has spent an entire night once again trapped within a tunnel on the road. However, in this instance, Weatherby, determined to overcome his fear of tunnels, has willingly walked into the mouth of the mountain. Cumberland discovers Weatherby "stopped at the portal of the tunnel. His mouth was open, as if to cry out, his hands were bloody from where he had gripped the rocks along the way. He touched the side of the tunnel. He whispered some word which nobody could hear" (Ehle, *Road* 400). Cumberland, feeling concerned about his mentor, approached Weatherby and as "the old, dead-man's eyes" focused on Cumberland, he heard Weatherby say: "Your time will come" (Ehle, *Road* 400). This arresting image is not only indicative of Weatherby's terrifying and horrific encounters with the natural world, but it also shows the

problematic anthropocentric natural sublime and a lack of humility in response to a landscape. As explored in the introductory portion of this chapter, Emily Brady has made the case for the incorporation of humility into the experience of the natural sublime in order to “feel insignificant in the face of powers that exceed us” (“Environmental Sublime” 179). Similarly, Terry Gifford places humility in the first post-pastoral question, “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” (*Reconnecting* 31). In *The Road*, Weatherby Wright’s transformation from an arrogant man, to one with “old, dead-man’s eyes” emerging from a cave, serves as a cautionary tale for those who fail to develop a sense of humility when confronted with the natural sublime. Weatherby’s perpetual humanization of nature represents the primary criticism regarding the anthropocentric natural sublime, in that it values humanity rather than nature, allowing the sublime to become “both *self-regarding* and *human regarding*” (Brady “Environmental Sublime” 177). This humanization of the environment is dangerous because it allows—as in the case of Weatherby Wright—humans to value culture rather than nature, an impulse which only deepens the divide between people and planet. Unlike Mooney Wright, Weatherby Wright is unable to incorporate humility into his response to the natural world, so Weatherby is therefore incapable of finding “a right relationship” with his natural home, as promoted by canonical preservationist John Muir.

## **Conclusion**

In “Satan’s Pause: Wonder and Environmental Preservation in *Paradise Lost*,” Peter C. Remien, echoing the environmental impulses of John Muir, argues that “wonder is often evoked as a catalyst for environmental preservation in various branches of modern environmentalist thought” (817). Remien argues that “against the grain of early modern

philosophy, Milton construes wonder as the agency employed by the unfallen world against threats posed by the rapacious human subject” in *Paradise Lost*, wherein, “wonder represents an aesthetic response to the environment capable of arresting human action” (“Satan’s Pause” 818). Rachel Carson expressed a similar sentiment in her essay, “The Real World Around Us,” by promoting the benefit of awe and wonder in reaction to the natural world, writing that the “more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction” (Carson 557).<sup>22</sup> For Remien, in terms of wonder or awe’s ability to curb environmental degradation, “what matters is the intentionality of the subject affected by wonder . . . if benevolent, wonder can motivate action . . . if pernicious, wonder can serve as a safeguard for the wonder inspiring object” (820). The question of intentionality in “the subject affected by wonder” illustrates an interesting juxtaposition of Mooney Wright and Weatherby Wright. In terms of *The Land Breakers*, Mooney Wright’s intentions regarding the natural world were overall benevolent, stemming from his desire to own land and build a modest cabin. As a result, Mooney’s wonder in the face of the natural world motivated practical action, inspiring Mooney to build a small but sturdy home, and assisting his neighbors in similar, sustainable ventures. In contrast, Weatherby Wright approaches the mountain with a pernicious goal to open up the mountain world via the railroad, a technology that rapidly increased the destruction of the mountain ecosystem through the logging industry and opened up other portions of the

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<sup>22</sup> For more information on Rachel Carson’s particular sense of wonder, see “The Secular and Religious Sources of Rachel Carson’s Sense of Wonder” by Lisa H. Sideris in *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge*, Lisa H. Sideris and Kathleen Moore, eds. SUNY Press, 2008, pp. 232-250.



Appalachian mountains to the highly exploitative coal industry.<sup>23</sup> As a result of his pernicious approach to the landscape, Weatherby Wright encountered three major, horrifying episodes of the natural sublime, all of which were perhaps intended to “serve as a safeguard for the wonder-inspiring object,” *Sow Mountain* (Remien 820). In these two novels, characters experience reactions to the natural world as varied as the reactions to the natural sublime itself, ranging from awe and humility to horror and bitterness. And as will be explored in the following chapters, it is through humility, not through bitterness, that humans find a “right relationship” with the environment.

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<sup>23</sup> In *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920*, Ronald L. Lewis illustrates that while there were small-scale timber ventures in Appalachia prior to the railroad, the introduction of this technology elicited large-scale capitalist investment from largely absentee business owners and Northeastern merchants. As a result, the scale of environmental degradation in the process of timber production increases dramatically.

### Chapter 3: “Everyday Nature” and Identity in Ehle’s Fiction

*“If the processes of inner nature echo those of outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?”*

*“If nature is culture, is culture nature?”*

—Terry Gifford *Reconnecting with John Muir* 32, 34

In his text, *Our National Parks*, John Muir describes the potential emotional, physical, and mental health benefits of spending time in the Rocky Mountains of the US. Muir writes: “Wander here a whole summer if you can. Thousands of God’s wild blessings will search you and soak you as if you were a sponge, and the big days will go by uncounted” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 33). Muir also has recommendations for those not able to spend an entire season in the majesty of the natural world, recommending a few weeks in the Flathead Reserve in Montana, which “is easily reached by the Great Northern Railroad. Get off the track at Belton Station, and in a few minutes you will find yourself in the midst of what you are sure to say is the best care-killing scenery on the continent” (qtd. in Gifford,

*Reconnecting* 32). Muir suggests that time spent exploring the landscape of the American West is certainly time well spent as he writes: “The time will not be taken from the sum of your life. Instead of shortening, it will lengthen and make you truly immortal” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 33). While not literally suggesting immortality, Muir was in fact trying to offer his readers a way to reconnect with the natural world, suggesting they embark on a voyage to connect with the outer landscape as well as their own inner landscape of the human psyche. This connection between the exterior environment and the inner-workings of the human mind prompted Terry Gifford to compose the third post-pastoral question: “If the processes of inner nature echo those of outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?” (*Reconnecting* 32). This question encompasses John Muir’s keen interest in the potential for using experiences in the environment to teach us about ourselves, in the hopes that we could make progress towards healing the deep divides between nature and culture and come a bit closer to finding the “right relationship” between humans and their natural home.

Muir was quite committed to breaking down the divide between nature and culture. This impulse to reexamine how humans divide themselves from the environment around them is apparent in Muir’s first publication. In his 1871 essay “Yosemite Glaciers,” Muir writes: “Two years ago, when picking flowers in the mountains back of Yosemite Valley, I found a book” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 33). Muir continues this rich metaphor as he elaborates that: “It was blotted and storm-beaten; all of its outer pages were mealy and crumbly, the paper seemed to dissolve like the snow beneath which it had been buried; but many of the inner pages were well preserved, and though all were more or less stained or torn, whole chapters were easily readable” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 34). This essay in

which Muir blends the divide between nature and culture as he describes “the great open book of Yosemite glaciers” highlights Terry Gifford’s argument: “Muir’s writings represent culture as nature, communicating information about the ecosystem we inhabit together” (*Reconnecting* 33, 34). Muir’s ability to blur the lines between the landscape and human culture led Terry Gifford to compose the fourth post-pastoral question: “If nature is culture, is culture nature?” (*Reconnecting* 34).

The third and fourth post-pastoral questions focus on the issue of nature’s role in human identity.<sup>24</sup> In his essay, “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” Scott Hess makes the case for a revised understanding of the environment one in which humans do not disconnect themselves from the natural world around them but rather incorporate a respect and appreciation for the natural world into our daily lives and identity as a species. Hess writes that: “Nature in environmental writing and culture today often appears as a form of refuge...the place where we go, both imaginatively and physically, to escape from this modernity” (“Imagining” 85). The alluring escape of nature was certainly appealing to transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau who retreated from urban life to a (short-lived) venture in solitude as documented in *Walden*. As a regional, modern example of this retreat, poet and environmentalist Thomas Rain Crowe documents his retreat from society to the remote forests of western North Carolina in *Zoro’s Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods*.

While accounts like these can certainly inspire awe, and perhaps conservation, as discussed in Chapter 2, for Hess these divisions between nature and culture, between the

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<sup>24</sup> In his essay, “The Idea of Nature,” cultural historian Leo Marx suggests that “in the 1970s, with the onset of the ecological ‘crisis,’ the refurbished, matter-of-fact word *environment* took over a large part of the niche in public discourse hitherto occupied for the word *nature*,” inspiring many scholars and journalists to lament the “death” of nature by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (8). While I admire the scope of this essay, because I will be exploring historical novels written before the so-called—“death” of nature, I will use the terms, “nature,” “landscape,” and “environment,” interchangeably.

environment and its human inhabitants are problematic: “This tendency to locate ‘nature’ apart from ourselves skews our environmental awareness and priorities in ways that blind us to the devastating ecological impact of our own daily lives and incapacitate us from pursuing realistic alternatives” (“Imagining” 85). Raymond Williams, in “Ideas of Nature,” also warns against the separation of humans from nature, writing: “When nature is separated out from the activities of men, it even ceases to be nature, in any full and respected sense. Men come to project on to nature their own unacknowledged activities and consequences” (81). Hess astutely questions readers about the futility of this self vs. environment identity: “If we seek nature apart from our lives, how can we restructure those lives—not just individually, but socially, politically, and economically—in order to change the current patterns of environmental destruction?” (“Imagining” 85). Hess suggests that because nature has been defined in literature and human thought as being “in opposition to the social, the economic, and the everyday,” a restructuring of human identity that incorporates nature into our routine lives is absolutely necessary (“Imagining” 85). Hess argues the case for “redefining ‘nature’ to include also the everyday and, in so doing, reshaping also the senses of self, work, and society with which our ideas of nature are inextricably and interdependently defined” (“Imagining” 85).

In *Nature and Social Theory*, Adrian Franklin makes a similar argument in favor of “everyday nature,” arguing that “for all its fanfare and colour, environmentalism does not exhaust or even tap into the more embedded natures of modernity; that there are beliefs, practices, knowledges and histories of the mundane, ordinary and everyday that are as important to understand” (12). For Franklin “natures of the everyday” include:

companion animals; the plants, trees and shrubs planted and tended in every household, the walks among natural communities in parks and other patches of nature in and around towns; the daily practices of eating foods . . . walking, sitting, picnicking . . . in innumerable natural settings that have been designed and provided on our own doorsteps. (*Nature and Social Theory* 8)

Similarly, for Scott Hess: “A literature of everyday nature is . . . a literature of home, work, and community” (“Imagining” 90). Rather than focusing on and idealizing the massive and immensely visually appealing landscapes of the American West such as the Rocky Mountains, as John Muir suggested, Hess instead suggests that an “everyday nature” is not simply about an expansive and exhilarating far-off location but instead is “a kind of attention, a way of defining our identities and values through local relationship rather than through imaginative escape” (“Imagining” 91).

John Ehle’s novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* illustrate an “everyday nature” and interacts with the third and fourth post-pastoral questions regarding the separation of nature from human identity. In *The Land Breakers*, Mooney Wright’s devotion to the everyday tasks of “breaking the land” and building a home and community illustrate the incorporation of nature into his identity and core values. Similarly, in *The Road*, HenryAnna Plover’s ability to critique the exploitative practices of railroad building in the Southern Appalachian landscape shows the breakdown of the divide between nature and culture. In “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” Scott Hess points out the inherent irony in modern interpretations of “nature,” as it excludes “public work and everyday habits of consumption” particularly because “these are the ways which we [as humans] are most physically grounded in our environments” (“Imagining” 91). In *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*, John Ehle does

not shy away from an “everyday nature” but instead achieves what Scott Hess describes as the function of an everyday nature—to restore the context between the environment and our daily lives and “in doing so, restore both our social and environmental wholeness” (91).

**“The Grit of the Land Was in Them”: An “Everyday Nature” in *The Land Breakers***

The inner workings of the human mind and soul are shaped by the outer workings of the natural world, and coming to understand one helps us understand the other. Acclaimed American nature writer Barry Lopez, in his essay “Landscape and Narrative,” echoes the words of John Muir as he describes two landscapes—“one outside the self, the other within” (64). For Lopez, “the external landscape is the one we see” and the second, interior landscape is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape” (64, 65). These two landscapes interact and inform one another as Lopez writes: “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is genes” (“Landscape and Narrative” 65). This depiction of an interior and exterior landscape ties directly to Terry Gifford’s third post-pastoral question, “If the processes of inner nature echo those of outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?” (*Reconnecting* 32). For both Muir and Lopez, studying and appreciating the external natural world can influence our sense of ourselves. The same sort of experiential environmental awareness and its role in connecting to one’s emotional state is present in John Ehle’s *The Land Breakers*, as Mooney Wright grieves for his deceased wife Imy.

Ehle describes the connection between Mooney’s inner nature and the outer nature of the environment around him in the blizzard that follows Imy’s untimely death. As Mooney sits alone in his cabin, trapped inside with his livestock for fear of the rapidly accumulating

snow outside, Ehle writes, “his mind turned on the thoughts of what he was to do, and of the past, coming like mountain mist in morning, leading to this place, to this room where he huddled with animals in winter . . . . Half of me is in the ground, he thought” (*Land* 43). As the storm rages outside, Mooney’s own inner thoughts are just as turbulent as the weather—he is clearly still blaming himself for leading Imy “to this place” where she suddenly died. Even after the snow ceases to fall, Mooney’s inner emotions echo those of the surrounding world. Ehle writes that Mooney “took long walks along the riverbank and saw where the cold water from mountain springs washed down, making indentations in the ice before losing itself underneath. High above, the mountains were white; the world was white and without meaning to him” (*Land* 43). Life is meaningless for Mooney and absent of color not simply because of the winter storm, but because of his grief over Imy’s absence.

Gradually, as the seasons change, so does Mooney as he begins to finally contemplate what he will do without Imy, allowing the gravity of her death to sink in and allowing himself to plan ahead. Ehle writes that as winter started to thaw, Mooney would wander outside, breathing in “the coldness and the tingling freshness of the pine sap. The air was clean and alive with frozen soundlessness and cleanliness, and it pained his chest to breathe the air for long. He crept back to his fireplace and . . . waited for a thought, some idea of what to do” (*Land* 43). Mooney’s willingness to breathe the mountain air, the element of the natural world he was so convinced had been the cause of Imy’s death, is astonishing (as discussed in Chapter 2). He no longer blames the wood smoke-filled air for killing his spouse but instead allows himself to experience the atmosphere, breathing it in and finding it clean. And just as Mooney finds the air painful to breathe “for long,” he is also beginning to deal with the pain and grief caused by his wife’s death. By hoping to generate “some idea of what



to do,” Ehle writes that although still grieving and still in pain, Mooney has not given up on his own life in the Appalachian woods.

As is the nature of the earth’s natural rhythm, spring affords new life and growth to the landscape surrounding Mooney’s cabin. Ehle writes that one morning, Mooney “awoke to hear a thousand birds, all sorts of birds . . . he went outdoors, pushing his long brown hair back from his bearded face, and saw great flocks of robins and bluebirds” (*Land* 44). Ehle describes “a profusion of life awakening” as “Alders came to budding life,” “The tops of maple trees put out red blooms,” “Azure butterflies darted about,” “tiger beetles haunted the trails,” and “Lizards moved in frightening dashes” (*Land* 44). Mooney was not immune to this seasonal renewal, but instead, “he would come into the clearing and stare about and listen to the noises, not echoing noises, not fearful either at this season, but vibrant lively sounds, which were out of sorts with his own distraught temper” (Ehle, *Land* 44). But as “the sweep of spring crept up on the mountain,” Mooney was not “distraught” much longer (Ehle, *Land* 45). Mooney’s disposition eventually began to reflect the levity of the season as Ehle writes: “The mountain country came into life again, slowly, then with a swish of color and action that caught a spark in him, too” (*Land* 45). Under the spell of nature’s seasonal renewal, Mooney “awoke each morning to the first light with a fresh expectancy and lay smelling in the newness of the air” (Ehle, *Land* 45). It is remarkable that the air itself, which Mooney previously viewed as the culprit responsible for Imy’s death, is now an element of the “exterior landscape” that Mooney now gladly greets each day.

The rebirth of the natural world, as seen in the “exterior landscape” inspires Mooney to reorganize and restructure his own “inner landscape” as well. As he comes to appreciate the mountain atmosphere, Mooney is learning not only to accept the landscape, but also to

accept himself. Mooney began to enjoy his own company as “he would take long walks . . . and he would chuckle to himself in this mad, busy world” (Ehle, *Land* 45). This is such a stark contrast to Mooney’s deep loneliness during the blizzard of the previous winter, when “the world was white and without meaning to him” (Ehle, *Land* 43). Ehle shows how massive Mooney’s inner transformation is as Mooney ventures back to the “clearing he and Imy made, and he would feel softness come back to the earth, a freshness come to it as if it wanted seed, was ready to be done finally with autumn’s ripeness and winter’s death” (*Land* 46). The similarities between Mooney’s “exterior landscape” and that of his “inner landscape” are incredibly clear in this scene. Just as the mountain’s clearing is “ready to be done” with the death of winter, Mooney, through his interactions with the “exterior landscape” is finally prepared to move forward from Imy’s death.

Even in this harmonious moment between man and nature, Ehle is careful to avoid idyllic depictions of the environment his characters inhabit, and he is careful not to allow Mooney’s new serenity to drag the novel into a traditional pastoral depiction of place. Ehle writes of Mooney: “Even in the wealth of spring, he remembered the harshness of the place, he thought, a place of dangers, after all” (*Land* 38). Mooney acknowledges that even as homesteaders and pioneers develop an appreciation for their new surroundings, they must not forget that it is still in many ways a wild place. This realization is incredibly similar to that of Henry David Thoreau at Mount Khatadin in his piece “Ktaadn” where he writes of his experience climbing the incredibly tumultuous summit of the Northern Appalachian mountains: “there was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man” (135). Both Thoreau and Ehle acknowledge that unlike humans, the natural world does not subscribe to a moral code which (hopefully) encourages fairness and the fair treatment of

sentient beings. This caution in the interactions between nature and human nature is a sharp contrast with the romantic pastoral tradition in which the natural world functions as a panacea for the maladies of urban life. In contrast, John Ehle shows that the natural world can bring about both hardship and happiness.

Depictions of nature in *The Land Breakers* illustrate the interrelationship between “exterior landscapes” and “interior” ones, while avoiding idyllic pastoral descriptions of the environment. John Ehle also carefully incorporates an “everyday nature” into the novel, particularly surrounding Mooney’s new wife Lorry and the couple’s new family unit. Not long after her arrival on a neighboring plot of land, Mooney marries Lorry, a skilled and hardworking woman from Virginia who was abandoned by her first husband. Ehle first describes the Wrights’ “everyday nature” as they work on taming Mooney’s land into a homestead. With the help of his new family, Mooney was able to clear the land much more quickly and effectively. Ehle writes that each member of the family, “knew what was expected of them now, and what could be expected of the work horse and of the chain and of the fires and ax, of all the tools and stock they used” (*Land* 106). The interconnectedness of each human family member, as well as the animals, natural elements, and tools mirrors the interrelatedness of the ecological community surrounding the family’s landscape. This focus on the routine, daily tasks humans complete in connection to the natural environment is clearly a use of “everyday nature.”

Ehle continues with an even more explicit use of “natures of the everyday” as he writes: “The family and the place were the same thing and could not be separated one from the other. One could not understand the family without knowing about the land and their work on it and plans for it, and one could not know the land without knowing this family of

people” (*Land* 107). In this passage, Ehle obtains what Scott Hess calls for in an “everyday nature,” one that “includes such everyday relationships and experience, even in its most common and untranscendent forms” (“Imagining” 97). As Ehle writes of Mooney’s new family: “They were dusty with the land; the grit of the land was in them” (*Land* 107), he communicates an “everyday nature” that breaks down the human/nature dualism and alters human identity so that nature can be perceived, respected, and incorporated into how we see ourselves in “our ordinary lives, work, actions, and relationships” (Hess, “Imagining” 97).

“Everyday nature” is also present in Ehle’s depiction of Mooney’s new wife, Lorry. Lorry has a clear understanding of the natural world, one that very much includes herself and her own family. Ehle writes that for her, “the falling of the rain, the growth and drying and breaking of green things, the cooking and eating and washing of the arms and hands and necks of the boys, the laughter in the firelight, the growth of the baby inside her were part of a pattern, as routinely and consistently drawn as the daytime light cast on the cabin floor” (*Land* 227). Lorry’s understanding of nature is an example of an “everyday nature” because her own identity and that of her family is indistinguishable from the natural world. Lorry’s “everyday nature,” “includes habitual as well as heightened experience, work as well as leisure, human as well as nonhuman relationships” (Hess “Imagining” 96). Lorry also explores the third post-pastoral question regarding the interrelatedness of her experiences of inner and outer nature as she, pregnant with Mooney’s child, looks to her various tasks around the family home as a means of easing her anxieties about childbirth. Ehle writes: “The work—digging and cutting away, lengthening the open spaces, felling trees and skinning logs, chopping bark for the tanning trough, the daily chores—helped take up her mind so that the baby due to arrive was a relaxing thought” (*Land* 227). In this passage, not

only is Lorry connecting the worry of her “interior landscape” to the business of her “exterior landscape,” Ehle is also emphasizing the practical and grounded environmental experiences that Lorry has with the surrounding landscape in her day-to-day life.

John Ehle’s writing in *The Land Breakers*, with its emphasis on the parallels and connections between our inner and outer nature provides an interesting commentary on the third post-pastoral question. Ehle also explores the divide between nature and culture present in the fourth post-pastoral question in his use of an “everyday nature.” These combined techniques illustrate for readers that humans cannot view themselves as operating in a separate realm from the natural world, but instead that our identity, our core values, must contain a respect for nature and an incorporation of the “exterior landscape” of the environment into the “inner landscape” of our minds.

### **HenryAnna’s “Everyday Nature” in *The Road***

In his review of *The Road* for *Appalachian Journal*, historian John C. Hennen provides a highly negative, reductionist portrait of the novel’s main female character, HenryAnna Plover. Hennen writes:

HenryAnna, the love interest of Weatherby’s younger alter ego Cumberland, is presented as a font of traditional folk wisdom ostensibly a mysterious and multidimensional figure. Her words, thoughts, and actions, however, suggest little more than the stereotypical trickster nymph not uncommon to highly romanticized sketches of mountain women . . . (201)

While HenryAnna is certainly capable of tricks, including leading Cumberland straight into the entrapment of a laurel slick to avoid his romantic advances (Ehle, *Road* 55-59), her character is much richer than this reviewer allows. In contrast to Hennen’s opinion of

HenryAnna as “little more than the stereotypical trickster,” HenryAnna possesses a mature and respectable “everyday nature” in John Ehle’s *The Road* as well as an adept cohesion between her “interior landscape” and the “exterior landscape” of the mountain world around her. HenryAnna’s opinions of the natural world also connect her to key issues in ecofeminist thought including the themes of ownership and domination.

When readers first meet HenryAnna Plover, the connection between her “interior” landscape and “exterior” one around her is quite apparent. As she observes the burgeoning work sites along Sow Mountain as Weatherby and his men begin the quixotic task of building the railroad, HenryAnna comments to Weatherby Wright, “I’ve been many times to this place, and I never saw you here before,” asking him, “You come out of the sky?” (Ehle, *Road* 28). Here HenryAnna’s own “everyday nature” first appears. For her, spending time along Sow Mountain is not temporary act of retreat from her own life, but a routine part of it. It is clear how intimately her own identity is tied to the mountain as she comments, “looks like the world is getting smaller ever day. If it goes on like this, it’s going to be too small for a woman at all. It’ll be filled up with men and mules and their kind” (Ehle, *Road* 28). HenryAnna’s sentiment of being overcrowded by men and “progress” is a notion she shares with Sow Mountain, and it points to the incorporation of outer nature into her own inner identity and core values.<sup>25</sup> Here HenryAnna laments the “shrinking” of her own mountain world as the Weatherby and his workers encroach upon her and the landscape.

HenryAnna further critiques Weatherby’s actions regarding their shared “exterior landscape,” as she warns: “If you’re going to come through here ever spring and fall with your stock, the least you can do is stay on the turnpike and off’n other people’s property”

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of the early of feminist and environmental impulses in the writings of Southern Appalachian women, see Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt’s *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*.

(Ehle, *Road* 28). Weatherby, either unaware or inattentive to HenryAnna's connection to the mountain world, quickly informed HenryAnna that he, in fact, owned the land in question. Voicing her critique of environmental domination, HenryAnna asks Weatherby, "What do you mean own?" elaborating, "I've been here so much, it's the place I come to to get off to myself, and I'm the only living person I ever saw here before" (Ehle, *Road* 29). In questioning Weatherby's ownership of the mountain, HenryAnna asserts her understanding of Sow Mountain as part of her "everyday nature" and connects to modern ecofeminist theory. As described by Josephine Donovan, ecofeminism "critiques the ontology of domination whereby living beings are reduced to the status of objects, which diminishes their moral significance, enabling their exploitation, abuse, and domination" ("Ecofeminist Literary Criticism" 161). By questioning Weatherby's claim of owning the land, HenryAnna is voicing her opposition to the objectification of Sow Mountain, which Weatherby uses to diminish the entire landscape down to a thing that can be "owned," an object that he can then shape and exploit to suit his own will.

HenryAnna's critique of Weatherby's claim to the mountain continues to mount, as she declares:

I never heard so much talk about who owns something which has been mine for years. If you mean did I ask somebody in an outland office if I could have a paper on it, I haven't had a paper on a woods in my life. I don't see how you can own a tree any more than you can make one, or how you can own land you didn't make the dirt for, or how you can be so proud as to say you buy what's nobody's to sell.

(Ehle, *Road* 29)

HenryAnna's opposition to Weatherby's "claim" over Sow Mountain also connects here to the strategies of modern ecofeminism. Ynestra King, in her essay, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology" suggests a similar principle as a guiding force in ecofeminist thought: "Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination" (151). King elaborates that "ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of nonhuman nature" ("Ecology of Feminism" 151). In her critique of Weatherby's domination of Sow Mountain, HenryAnna Plover is illustrating for readers the connection between the world getting smaller, filling up with men and mules, and Weatherby's willingness to say he can "buy what's nobody's to sell" (Ehle, *Road* 29).

Ehle demonstrates that HenryAnna's critique of the domination of Sow Mountain is not unfounded, but that she comes to this deep state of environmental knowingness because of her own connection to the landscape: her inner nature echoes that of outer nature. Ehle writes of HenryAnna as she questions Weatherby along the road: "She knew the ways of nature very well; there was nothing in this place which she has not been able to understand before today" (*Road* 30). It is this connection to the natural world that attracts Cumberland, Weatherby's foreman, to HenryAnna. Ehle writes that Cumberland saw in HenryAnna, "one who viewed the real world in terms of her own experiences, who was natural and free as life itself, and who was, therefore, his own opposite . . . she had experienced, not simply considered and discussed, her own world" (*Road* 31). Here it is clear that what Cumberland admires about HenryAnna is her "everyday nature." As Scott Hess writes in "Imagining an Everyday Nature," a "nature of the everyday" requires a different understanding of nature



that urges us to alter “how we define ourselves, no longer through forms of imaginative escape or transcendence but through our ordinary lives, work, actions, and relationships” (97). What draws Cumberland to HenryAnna is her incorporation of nature into her everyday life, rather than simply thinking of nature as the source of exaltation with the natural sublime frequently found in literature, that which, as a former university English professor, Cumberland had become accustomed to reading.

Yet Ehle explains that aside from her intriguing “everyday nature,” Cumberland also found himself drawn to HenryAnna because of how clearly her “interior landscape” mirrored the “exterior landscape” of Sow Mountain. Ehle writes that beyond even her clear connection to the natural world, Cumberland fancied HenryAnna because:

she was unlined and unmarked, uncontaminated and untormented. Even beyond that, she was free, not only in the sense that she could go and come when and where she chose, but she carried with her the breath of the mountain air; she was free in the sense that she was natural, and in her own place. (*Road* 47)

The parallels between HenryAnna’s “unlined and unmarked” body and Sow Mountain are quite clear. Cumberland recognizes in HenryAnna a virginal purity similar to what he found in the mountain landscape when he first arrived. Cumberland sees HenryAnna, much like Sow Mountain, as something for him to dominate and ravage. Cumberland elaborates that although he was attracted to HenryAnna: “It was, he told himself, completely unreasonable of him, a well-educated person, once a college-instructor, to be interested to a point of distraction in an untamed, uneducated female” (Ehle, *Road* 53-54). Yet, “he was” (Ehle, *Road* 54). This connection between a female human and a feminized landscape again connects to ecofeminism. For Ynestra King, another key component of ecofeminist thought

is the realization that “Western industrial civilization” is built “in opposition to nature,” a circumstance which “reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature” (“Ecology of Feminism” 151). It is precisely HenryAnna’s perceived closeness to nature that, on one hand, Cumberland admires, but at the same time, as a product of his own Western industrialized society, he seeks to tame and control.

In her conversation with Cumberland, HenryAnna also calls into question the arbitrary nature of the divide between nature and human culture. HenryAnna chides Cumberland for his impulse to control nature when he mentions installing a cabin on top of a peaceful mountaintop bald, saying to him, “You’re always trying to tame everything” (Ehle, *Road* 127). Readers are again reminded of how Cumberland views HenryAnna as a tricky, intriguing part of the mountain world as he replies, “I did try to tame you once or twice, and failed” (Ehle, *Road* 127). To which HenryAnna, “tossed her long hair back from her face and smiled, more in self-satisfaction than at him” (Ehle, *Road* 127). HenryAnna also resisted Cumberland’s impulse “to write down the different species of trees on the mountain” (Ehle, *Road* 128). Ehle writes that HenryAnna “had not been enthusiastic about this, even when he explained that scientists could systematize such a list and use it” (*Road* 128). For HenryAnna, this list “was starkly removed from the substance of the mountain itself; she didn’t much want to help him, but as he worked at the process of identification, she was an accompanying witness” (Ehle, *Road* 128). HenryAnna was reluctant to embark on what to her seemed an undoubtedly strange cataloging project because of her use of an “everyday nature.” HenryAnna held the myriad of trees and plants within the mountains in high regard because she was so familiar with them, because they were part of her routine life and her lived identity in connection to the environment around her. HenryAnna’s description of

Cumberland's list as "starkly removed" from "the mountain itself" conveys her connection to the broader landscape through her "everyday nature."

HenryAnna further illustrates her knowledge of both her own "inner nature" and the "outer nature" of the natural world as she criticizes Cumberland's impulse to dominate the wildness around him. While sitting atop a mountain bald, watching deer graze, Cumberland noticed there "were perhaps a thousand cleared acres, unfenced, untended" (Ehle, *Road* 127). HenryAnna tells Cumberland that "Nobody knew for sure how it came to be here, but another mountain close by also had a bald top and deer grazing. These balds were footprints of a giant who once walked through," according to local mountain legends (Ehle, *Road* 127). Cumberland was completely immune to the majestic origins of these natural balds, was unable or unwilling to recognize this part of the landscape as a "nature of the everyday," and instead saw them as an easy way to make money. Cumberland suggests to HenryAnna: "You could put cattle up here" and he begins "wondering if he could build a cabin near where they sat" (Ehle, *Road* 127). Just as she did with Weatherby Wright, HenryAnna criticizes Cumberland's impulse to buy land. As Cumberland suggests that he "could put a cabin up here and put a fence on part of this land", HenryAnna quickly reminds him, "It's not yours to do . . . You can't buy what's not yours to own . . . What would the deer do?" (Ehle, *Road* 127). In this passage, HenryAnna is questioning the divide between nature and culture, questioning Cumberland's belief that as a member of a Western, industrialized culture he could dominate the mountain with no concern for the open bald land and the deer. In pushing against Cumberland's impulse to alter the landscape to his own whims, HenryAnna is once again illustrating her "everyday nature," a paradigm that allows her to recognize the needs of the species around her, even deer, as well as the nonhuman nature of the mountaintop.

Cumberland is unable to invoke an “everyday nature” atop the mountain, and he also starts to experience the hubris associated with the natural sublime, as discussed in Chapter 2. Sitting high in the mountains, Cumberland asks HenryAnna, “Does it give you a feeling of power to be up here this high?” HenryAnna replies, “I like the valleys better for living . . . and this for climbing to.” When Cumberland again pushes her, “But doesn’t it give you a feeling of power?”, HenryAnna thoughtfully replies, “No more than it does that woody vine on the rock” (Ehle, *Road* 127). Here it seems Cumberland has adopted what Cian Duffy refers to as the “discourse of assent” wherein individuals in high altitude environments link “the physical assent of mountains to a wide variety of ostensibly unrelated forms of elevation, moral, political, epistemological, etc.—as well as religious” (*Landscapes of the Sublime* 18). While looking down on the mountain world, Cumberland quite literally views himself as more powerful than he is down in the valley, and perhaps sees himself as more powerful than those in the valley as well. While this assent for Cumberland is similar to the “discourse of assent” (as discussed in Chapter 2,) it once again emphasizes HenryAnna’s everyday nature. The fact that HenryAnna prefers the valley landscape that she is accustomed to in her daily life, rather than the undoubtedly exhilarating mountaintop, shows that she has shifted her own identity to one that does not enjoy and experience nature through “imaginative escape of transcendence” (Hess, “Imagining” 97) but instead, has incorporated the familiar landscape of her routine, daily life into her view of the environment around her.

Ehle writes that HenryAnna’s “everyday nature” is not entirely lost on Cumberland. While sitting atop the mountain bald, Ehle writes of Cumberland’s understanding regarding his conversation with HenryAnna:

He supposed she was telling him she was part of the place and he was not, that even yet he could come here and think he owned or possessed or dominated it, but he didn't even know it. Maybe, he thought, this was one other difference between them, in terms not only of the place but of the people, too. (*Road* 127-128)

Given the differences between HenryAnna and Cumberland, it is probably of no surprise that the pair did not transform their love affair into a lifetime together. While there is no stereotypical, heteronormative “riding off into the sunset” scene for HenryAnna and Cumberland, HenryAnna’s unique role in the novel should not be discounted. She is much more than the “stereotypical trickster nymph,” that reviewer John Hennen describes (199). Instead, HenryAnna Plover demonstrates an admirable embrace of the “everyday nature” and ecofeminist principles surrounding domination and dominion. HenryAnna’s ability to understand her “interior landscape” of her own feelings and thoughts as well as the “exterior landscape” of the mountain world around her further validates *The Road* as a post-pastoral text.

## Conclusion

In arguing for an “everyday nature,” Scott Hess suggests that “environmental thought and imagination needs this category of ‘everyday nature’ precisely because the legacy of Romantic and wilderness nature as a ‘place apart’ is so deeply embedded in Western assumption, often in ways that are impossible to see without close critical attention” (“Imagining” 102).<sup>26</sup> As Hess writes, the Romantic ideas of the nature still promote “escapism and autonomous individualism” both of which negatively impact the relationship

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the impact of the Romantics on modern environmental thought, see James McKusick’s *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*, Katey Castellano’s *The Ecology of British Romantic Conservatism, 1790-1837*, and Scott Hess’s *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth Century Culture*.

between humans and the natural world (102). In his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon argues that in “idealizing a distant wilderness,” a wilderness-oriented conception of nature states that “the place where we are is the place where nature is not,” meaning we often ignore or abandon our local landscapes in order to protect wilderness areas (81). Both Romantic ideas of nature and the idea of wilderness have allowed “Nature” in environmental writing and the public consciousness to be “defined in opposition to the social, the economic, and the everyday” (Hess, “Imagining” 85). By redefining nature into an “everyday nature,” we may come to realize that “we can imagine nature without having to escape our own lives, work, and relationships.” (Hess, “Imagining” 102). An “everyday nature,” therefore, reintegrates nature “into the ordinary, returning value and spirituality into our everyday lives and relationships as part of a wider process of resacramentalization” (Hess, “Imagining” 102).

John Ehle’s fiction offers readers a sense of an historic Appalachian “everyday nature” one in which early settlers, who must “break” the land to survive, come to realize that they cannot be separated from the land and the work they are doing to it. For the Wrights in *The Land Breakers*, this sense of a “nature of the everyday” allows them to more easily understand their “interior landscape” through their knowledge of the “exterior landscape” around them. For Mooney Wright, understanding his outer nature with the birth of spring allowed him to see how his inner nature could heal and experience new life after the tragic loss of his wife, Imy. Similarly, in *The Road*, HenryAnna Plover navigates the rapidly changing world of her own “exterior landscape,” the mountain world, with an adept understanding of her own “inner nature.” Her environmental knowingness and “everyday nature” are part of her core identity, and both of these components of how she understands

herself allow her to openly critique the arrival of “progress” via industrialization and railroad building in the mountains. The connection between HenryAnna’s inner nature and the outer nature of the “mountain world,” ultimately allows her to confidently walk away from Cumberland, a man who did not share her connection to the mountains, ending their love affair before it smothered her “everyday nature.” Ultimately, the understandings of nature in Ehle’s fiction allows readers to see the inherent value in an “everyday nature,” an accessible inclusion of the landscape around us into our daily lives, one that can give us both a greater understanding of the environment, as well as deepening our understandings of ourselves.

#### Chapter 4: The “Responsibility of Restraint” in Ehle’s Fiction

*“How, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?”*

*“How should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?”*

—Terry Gifford *Reconnecting with John Muir* 34-35

In 1897, five years after founding the legendary Sierra Club, John Muir published an essay entitled, “The American Forests” in *Atlantic Monthly* wherein he vehemently criticized the rampant deforestation spreading across the nation’s woodlands. At the time, lumbermen, mining corporations, herders, and shepherds were quickly clearing vast tracks of forested land in order to both turn a profit from timber and repurpose the landscape for their own use. Muir saw this activity as disrupting and troubling the relationship between human beings and their natural home—planet earth. Unlike farmers and industrialists who were actively shaping the landscape to better suit their own immediate personal use, Muir was a proponent of protected forested lands—large, publicly owned tracts that were to remain wild for the ecological and recreational benefit of being wild, simply wildness for wildness’s sake (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 34-35).



Muir's proposal for protected forests was met with a considerable and highly vocal opposition from individuals focused on deforesting the landscape. In "The American Forests," Muir offered an acerbic critique of his opponents: "The outcries we hear against forest reservations come mostly from thieves who are wealthy and steal timber by wholesale....Any fool can destroy the trees. They cannot run away . . . . Since Christ's time—God has cared for these trees . . . but he cannot save them from fools" (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 34-35). In this passage, Muir's mention of God's care for trees highlights the ethical nature of the fifth post-pastoral question. For Muir, human conscientiousness would serve as a safety-net to prevent long-term environmental exploitation through deforestation and other related forms of resource extraction. Terry Gifford has demonstrated that Muir had "faith in the American public's ability, ultimately, to find a 'right relationship' with the natural environment of America" (*Reconnecting* 35). In "The American Forests," Muir wrote that "The people will not always be deceived by selfish opposition, whether from lumber mining corporations or from sheepmen and prospectors, however cunningly brought forward underneath fables of gold" (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 35). Here Muir provides "an endorsement of the collective conscience of the [human] species" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 35). This belief that the distinctively human conscience can help us mend our relationship with the natural world around us, prompts Gifford to pose the fifth post-pastoral question: "How, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?" (*Reconnecting* 34).

While Muir felt confident that the human conscience would eventually curtail environmental degradation, he also made a powerful connection between what is good for the planet and what is good for the people. In "The American Forests," Muir urged the American

people “to limit rapacious free enterprise to bring these forest environments under a ‘policy of administration for the public good’” (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 35). Muir’s connection between the good of the people and the good of the environment is clear in the sixth post-pastoral question: “How should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 35). Exploitation runs rampant in John Ehle’s *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*. In order to best understand the forms of exploitation in terms of both people and planet in John Ehle’s fiction, Wendell Berry’s ideas regarding the divide between “exploitation and nurture” as well as Aldo Leopold’s writings about the “responsibility of restraint” are particularly useful.

In John Ehle’s novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*, characters navigate the divide between “exploitation” and “nurture” as described by American poet, critic, and environmentalist Wendell Berry by exploring the “responsibility of restraint,” an ethical tool in human and nature interactions that stems from the writings of Aldo Leopold. In his seminal text, *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry suggests that as humans we can “understand our own time and predicament and the work that is to be done” by understanding ourselves as being “divided between exploitation and nurture” (9). For Berry, the terms “exploitation and nurture” explore the “division not only between persons but also within persons;” he explains that, “to some extent,” we are all “the products of an exploitative society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp” (9). The writings of acclaimed American wildlife ecologist Aldo Leopold provide insight about how to navigate the divide between “exploitation and nurture.” Much like John Muir, Leopold argues that “by virtue of their level of consciousness and imagination,” humans “are not simply teammates with plants and animals and soils but hold a privileged position”

(Ryden 1). Kent C. Ryden, in his examination of Leopold's work entitled, "How Can A Weed Be A Book?", elaborates about this "privileged position," writing that for Leopold, humans "occupy a unique ethical position rather than a privileged right to self-interested power; with our technological and imaginative capabilities comes great responsibility, particularly the responsibility of restraint" (2). This "responsibility of restraint" in terms of limiting human exploitation of those around them as well as the natural world is clearly present in the fifth and sixth post-pastoral questions and will be explored, in connection to John Ehle's Appalachian novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* in the following pages.

John Ehle's protagonist Mooney Wright in *The Land Breakers* displays these qualities of restraint, using his energy to improve living conditions for himself and those around them, while resisting a highly exploitative practice commonly accepted during his time, slavery. While Mooney Wright discovers a "right relationship" with his mountain home by not exploiting other people or the mountain's vast natural resources, Weatherby Wright, the protagonist of Ehle's novel *The Road*, is not as successful in maintaining an equilibrium between people and planet. Weatherby Wright finds himself unable to resist the highly exploitative technological and social practices of his time, namely steam engines and inmate labor, illustrating that he is unable to employ the "responsibility of restraint" to limit himself from increasing the exploitation from which his society was created. As Weatherby senselessly utilizes the mechanized machinery available to him, he increases the exploitation of his workers, those who care for him, and the natural world, with dramatic, and ultimately fatal consequences. Weatherby's failure to resist exploitation prevents him from achieving the post-pastoral goal of finding a "right relationship" with the natural world.

**Restraint and “Breaking the Land” in John Ehle’s *The Land Breakers***

Throughout John Ehle’s “Mountain Novel,” *The Land Breakers*, the young, determined, and skilled settler Mooney Wright serves as a positive example of the how the “responsibility of restraint” can lead to a “right relationship” between people and planet in the Appalachian backwoods of the 1790s. Mooney is quick to lend a helping hand to his fellow settlers, making the establishment of a sustainable and reputable community within the forests surrounding Old Fort, North Carolina, as much of a priority as feeding his own growing family. Throughout the novel, Mooney and his wife Lorry are focused on helping the influx of settlers into the region establish modest, yet sturdy homesteads, which can afford them the best chances of survival in the rugged and wild landscape of the American Mountain South. This willingness to assist others rather than taking advantage of their naiveté in a new landscape is particularly evident as the Wrights welcome Paul and Nancy Larkins into their community known as “Harristown.” Upon first meeting Paul, Mooney realizes, “here was a neighbor who could be of help; the two families could help each other” (Ehle, *Land* 107). Mooney’s assistance helps Paul and Nancy fit a roof over their heads and also provides Paul with a valuable ecological lesson, cultivating respect for the natural resources that abound in his new home. Ehle writes that Paul began to notice, “it took so long to get a tree cut. A tree didn’t yield to his strength of will or daring, but only to the continual cutting of his ax. Sometimes half the morning would pass and he would still be cutting on the same tree; he was forever and a day surprised by that” (*Land* 107). For Paul Larkins, this realization that cutting down each tree by hand took so much time and brute strength led him to the “responsibility of restraint,” inspiring him to construct a small but sturdy cabin, one

that he built, along with Mooney's help, by cutting down only as many trees as absolutely necessary.

In *The Land Breakers*, collaboration between Mooney Wright's family and their neighbors embodies sustainable community development and sustainable forestry practices. In their modest homesteads, these settlers help each other survive, taking only what they need and using the vast majority of what they take. Unlike Mooney and the young men he assists, one member of the new community in *The Land Breakers*, Tinkler Harrison, is quite careless in his use of natural resources. While Mooney continues to visit and aid his neighbors, "he never went to Tinkler Harrison's house" (Ehle, *Land* 107). Although Mooney's character prevents him from fraternizing with the likes of Harrison, the arrogant, aging, and ever-impetuous man who named the surrounding community, "Harristown," eventually Mooney wanders along the river to examine Tinkler's massive home, finding:

The house was long and low, unlike any he had seen in Pennsylvania or Virginia. Its river-side door must have been eight feet high and four feet wide. It was, to his way of thinking, foolish to build such a big door, better to have a small opening, but the old man had made what he wanted. The house had two great stone chimneys, large roof shakes, and ten shimmering panes of glass. (Ehle, *Land* 107-108)

While Tinkler Harrison's home may initially seem impressive and enviable, as readers come to understand Tinkler as an exploiter of both land and people, his home and lifestyle become extremely unappealing. Ehle reveals to readers that Tinkler forced his slaves to complete his home site rather than personally investing any of his own time, effort, and "sweat equity." Tinkler's lack of personal labor and investment in the construction of his home caused him to order the felling of many more trees and use many more natural

resources than any of his neighbors, illustrating his failure to yield to the “responsibility of restraint.” These unsustainable practices are directly connected to his use of slave labor.

Because Tinkler Harrison does not experience the slow, laborious process of felling trees, as Mooney Wright and Paul Larkins do, he has no motivation to use the raw materials around him wisely or sustainably.

In contrast to Tinkler Harrison, throughout *The Land Breakers* Mooney Wright serves as an adept example of how restraint can improve relations between humans and their natural home. As previously illustrated, Mooney is incredibly responsible when extracting natural resources, careful not to take more than he can use and careful to use what he takes. Mooney approaches the extraction of natural resources with care and self-discipline and employs the same mindset in his approach to those around him. Unlike Tinkler Harrison, Mooney Wright does not utilize slave labor and respects his duty as a community leader. For Mooney, this sense of duty inspires him to help less-experienced neighbors, such as Paul Larkins, “break the land” in a responsible, sustainable manner. This juxtaposition of Mooney Wright and Tinkler Harrison further emphasizes Mooney’s environmental intelligence and his use of the “responsibility of restraint” in his approach to interactions with the natural world. Further, this pairing prompts readers to critically consider the role of Tinkler’s avarice in terms of his relationships with other people and his planetary home.

Tinkler’s possession of slaves and his exploitation of those around him clearly illustrate that unlike Mooney Wright, Tinkler cannot help himself but to advance his own standing, no matter what the cost to other people or the planet. In the late spring of 1872, one year after he began establishing his settlement in the North Carolina Mountains, Tinkler reflects on his life in the Appalachian wilderness. Ehle writes that “Tinkler took a chair down

to the river and set it near a beech tree . . . so that he could feel the full warmth of the early-year sun” (*Land* 175). Tinkler enjoyed this sunny spot along the river “because the turbulence of its waters responded to the turbulence of his mind” (Ehle, *Land* 175). Ehle shares that the currents of Tinkler’s mind are occupied by his schemes and ambitions for the future of Harristown. While sitting by the river, Tinkler imagines a wide variety of buildings and crops coming up in the settlement: “he could envision great open fields rich with corn and later on with wheat and rye. He could imagine a mill could be set not far from his house on the river. He could hear blacksmith hammers ringing out . . .” (*Land* 175). While these daydreams may seem innocuous at first, readers are quickly reminded of Tinkler’s penchant for exploitation and its implications for his future plans. Partly because of his advanced age, and partly because of his own desire to exercise his power and possess the largest home in Harristown, any construction on Tinkler Harrison’s plantation is not done by his own wrinkled hands, but by his slaves and his own son, Grover Harrison.

Throughout *The Land Breakers*, Tinkler Harrison is not only willing to exploit the labor and efforts of his slaves and his family, but also the new influx of settlers he hopes to attract to his community, “Harristown.” In considering his son Grover’s upcoming visit to Morganton, North Carolina, a nearby and much more established town, Tinkler decides that Grover should avoid revealing the true condition of the Harristown settlement to incoming settlers who might be looking to purchase a bit of land from him and join the community. Tinkler admits to himself that “all these measures of progress” he daydreamed of “were no nearer realization this spring than they had been the last. In fact, the settlement was in worse shape” (Ehle, *Land* 176). Yet despite this awareness that Harristown’s true condition was “small and poor,” Tinkler resolves that “Grover need not talk” about the community’s

condition “in Morganton next time he went to advertise the place” (Ehle, *Land* 176). Tinkler is clearly aware that if new settlers to the area knew that his daydreams for the settlement were a far cry from coming into fruition, Harristown would be unlikely to recruit any new residents. Rather than promoting a genuine depiction of the settlement, Tinkler feels he must exploit the hopes of incoming homesteaders looking to purchase land of their own in order to grow his community.

This deliberate omission of Harristown’s dismal reality and limited opportunities shows that Tinkler resists the “responsibility of restraint” in his willingness to exploit and abuse new settlers coming into the region, willing to sell them land in his undeveloped settlement, perhaps in the hopes that he will soon have even more able bodies to use in completing his numerous building projects and labor-intensive homesteading ventures. Tinkler’s willingness to knowingly invite settlers into a rugged, challenging landscape without fully informing them of what to expect has the potential to abuse those who accept his offer but also degrade the earth itself as unskilled and unprepared homesteaders fill the area and overuse natural resources. Harrison’s exploitation could also undermine the sustainability of the community’s social networks as well, as those who decided to join Harristown would certainly realize that Tinkler’s settlement was not nearly as prosperous as promised. Tinkler Harrison’s scheme to grow and strengthen Harristown was not only unethical, but also highly unlikely to be successful.

Luckily for Harrison and all involved in *The Land Breakers*, Mooney Wright had a much more promising and honest plan to secure the success of the entire settlement. In the late summer of 1782, Mooney Wright began to develop a cattle drive, a chance for himself and his neighbors in the settlement to take their livestock to sell for cash in the Morganton



markets. With cash in hand, Mooney and his neighbors could settle debts in town, buy more livestock, and even purchase products they could not manufacture for themselves, such as coffee and sugar. But Mooney is well aware that a journey to the nearest town—a fortnight-long trek of Herculean proportions—will not be easy, and certainly will do much more than provide the settlers of Harristown with extra goods. For Mooney, the drive to Morganton means a chance to discover if “whatever hope they had as a community was either realized or thwarted” (Ehle, *Land* 293). Mooney knew that he and his neighbors needed to make an appearance in Morganton, to illustrate that the residents of Harristown were alive and well and had spent the past year raising livestock for trade. Mooney was well aware that the quality of stock he and his neighbors were able to produce for trade would serve as a proxy for potential settlers in their community, an indication of perhaps how successful they too could be in Harristown. Unlike Tinkler Harrison who wanted to measure the success of the community by how many buildings he can put up, for Mooney Wright, the success of Harristown will be judged by how well the various residents seem to be getting along in the mountains. While Tinkler was dedicated to having his son falsely advertise the settlement once he arrived in town, for Mooney the arrival in Morganton with livestock to sell would be an immense success in and of itself. Mooney was far more motivated by what the drive could potentially do for his neighbors, what being able to acquire cash and settle debts would do for the residents of Harristown, again setting Mooney apart from Tinkler Harrison who was instead hoping he could exploit the influx of neighbors to advance his own financial standing.

As Mooney reluctantly approaches Tinkler to discuss the upcoming cattle drive, the disparities between the two and their opinions on Harristown are quite apparent. Mooney

generously extends to Tinkler an invitation to join in on the trip to Morganton. Tinkler stubbornly refuses to participate because of his disapproval of the other settlers going on the journey, neighbors whom he thinks are lazy and ignorant, an ironic perception given his reliance on slave labor and on his son Grover. Frustrated with his refusal, Mooney tells Tinkler that “you can’t build a settlement here if you go alone” (Ehle, *Land* 296). Illustrating his own hubris, Tinkler replies with his concerns for Harristown: “I wonder about this settlement. I have since it started, seems like nobody here has mind enough to build anything, except me and my folks” (Ehle, *Land* 296). Once again readers are reminded of how ironic this statement about Tinkler’s building is because of his exploitation of the natural environment and his slaves and because, as illustrated above, Tinkler himself is dissatisfied with the overall progress of Harristown. Mooney humorously probes Tinkler’s own insecurities by asking, “Not much settlement building up here, is there?” (Ehle, *Land* 296).

This conflict between the two competing leaders of Harristown illustrates just how different Mooney Wright is from Tinkler Harrison in terms of care for the well-being of his neighbors. Within this conversation, Mooney outlines his own careful approach to the development of the community, his cautious attempt to “break the land” within Harristown. Mooney Wright is clearly aware of the need for settlers to work together to establish a sustainable community in the mountains of North Carolina. Mooney’s collaborative work ethic is clear in his concluding words to Tinkler: “You say you want to build a settlement but you don’t want one, seems to me. You want to make a single farm, and that is yours. You would as soon see all of the rest go down. If you plan to make a settlement here, you have to take part in it as a whole thing” (Ehle, *Land* 297).

Reluctantly, Tinkler decides to enlist his son and two of his slaves to help him make the drives with other settlers from Harristown. Tinkler's cooperation has all but disappeared by the third day of the drive. Despite rainy, foggy conditions, Tinkler resolves that his livestock should reach Morganton first, forcing Grover and his slaves to push his thirty sheep on through the rugged mountain path. Grover tries his best to stay at the front of the herd, but with such difficult weather conditions, he ends up falling behind the sheep. He follows them up to a steep precipice where he watches with horror as "each sheep leaped into the cloud, and each appeared below the cloud, falling out of the cloud into clear space below, falling gracefully . . . into the trees of the valley below" (Ehle, *Land* 330). Ehle writes that Grover watched as "the white ram, the white ewes, each falling to the death of each, and there was nothing to be done" (*Land* 330). After hearing of the loss of his sheep, Tinkler abandons the cattle drive altogether and returns, dejectedly, back to Harristown. Perhaps feeling guilty for leading the drive, and perhaps fearing that all the settlers would have the same unfortunate experience along the road, Mooney leads the rest of the settlers and their livestock back home, just in time to visit with Tinkler Harrison on his deathbed, as the pneumonia he acquired on the drive begins to take its fatal toll.

When Mooney arrives at the Harrison plantation to check in on Tinkler's condition, their conversation conveys the mental and emotional toll the cattle drive had on Tinkler. The drive has transformed Tinkler from a bitter, negative man, to one who recognizes the cost of his stubbornness in missed opportunities to experience community with those around him. Rather than berating Mooney for starting the journey to Morganton, Tinkler instead encourages Mooney to make another go of it, to try again: "you can make a way, if you take control and drive on through, and have half luck with the weather" (Ehle, *Land* 339). Tinkler

elaborates that he has realized that “a drive takes working together, and so does a settlement. I tell you, a drive can be made, given time” (Ehle, *Land* 339). Tinkler’s transformation is remarkable and is a revolutionary recognition of the power of the natural world. But unfortunately for Tinkler Harrison, this recognition of the agency and the influence of the landscape around him arrived far too late.

While this realization of the need to respect other people and the planet did not result in a transformation with favorable long-term consequences in Tinkler Harrison’s life, Tinkler’s eventual realization and encouragement towards Mooney did enhance the burgeoning community. This much needed support and change in perspectives mobilizes Mooney to try again, to complete a successful drive to Morganton and cement the success of Harristown. Tinkler’s demise highlights the contrasting approaches to breaking new ground that Mooney and Tinkler each possess. With Tinkler’s eventual death, as Mooney becomes the new community leader, readers further understand that Mooney’s way of living in the mountains does not involve “breaking” the land, but instead living with it, and living well with others. Mooney offers the ideal way to survive in the American Mountain South of the 1780s.

### **“Endangered by Violence in Two Directions”: Exploitation in *The Road***

Much like Tinkler Harrison of *The Land Breakers*, protagonist Weatherby Wright of *The Road* fails to yield to the “responsibility of restraint” in terms of his ability to exploit those around him as well as the natural world. In a heated debate with the state-assigned physician regarding the poor working conditions for inmate workers along the road, Weatherby Wright confidently stated: “We work with criminals, and we work against nature, so we’re endangered by violence in two directions. I hope you’ll try to gain sympathy for the

tasks that face each one” (Ehle, *Road* 173). Weatherby is either unable or unwilling to curtail his own goals of completing the road in order to treat other people or the planet with respect, leading to rampant exploitation throughout the novel. In *The Road*, rather than recognizing the landscape as well as the people around him as actors with free will of their own, Weatherby perpetually exploits the region’s natural resource as well as its inhabitants. Weatherby Wright fails to recognize that other beings and places hold power as well as himself, a failure that will leave him marred and scarred by his interactions in building the road.

Weatherby Wright is willing to exploit the prison labor force involved in the road’s construction and the women in his life, namely his wife Mildred, and the young mountain woman, HenryAnna. In order to increase the efficiency of the road’s construction and tunnel building, Weatherby Wright insists that his workers use nitroglycerine to blast massive chunks of rock and soil out of the mountain. As Weatherby stares at the jagged and dark rock the men are about to blow up, he thinks of his wife Mildred, and realizes that the mountain resembles an old woman (Ehle, *Road* 152). Ehle comments that, in fact, this explosive experience reminded several men along the road of the women in their lives, as Weatherby thinks of Mildred, and a worker named Esau thinks of his wife at home (*Road* 151-152). As Weatherby retreats to his office to think about his work on the road, he finds himself feeling quite vulnerable and haggard, as Ehle writes: “It seemed that success was within sight. Yet he was under pressure, he was raw inside, worn thin and worn down. He was getting to be more like the convicts and the foremen. He was caught as they were in the mesh of the operation, which grew larger every month” (*Road* 155). Rather than taking this moment of realization to come to a reckoning with the consequences of his exploitation of his workers

and the landscape, Weatherby's mind instantly flits over to his wife Mildred, to the comfort and safety she could provide him. Weatherby thinks of her and realizes, "he should go see her now. He could spend Sunday with her. He felt such warmth and comfort in her house, being with her . . . eating at a table, washing before his meals, sleeping under a quilt comforter" (Ehle, *Road* 155). Weatherby is clearly longing to be in the comfort of his spouse after his traumatic experiences along the road. However, Weatherby's only positive mention of the comfort and rejuvenation his wife's presence brings him is in this passage, coming after a very stressful encounter along the road. Because Weatherby's attachment to Mildred only appears when he himself is vulnerable and exhausted, it seems that Weatherby is exploiting Mildred's attention and affection to temporarily alleviate his own guilt and frustration surrounding the road. Weatherby contemplates the ways in which a visit with Mildred would benefit him, concluding: "If he didn't get away more often, the pressure on the Road could harden him like a rock. Yes, and crack him like a rock" (Ehle, *Road* 155).

Soon after the arrival of nitroglycerine at the road worksites, the mountain does, in fact, crack Weatherby like a rock, trapping him in a cave with denned in rattlesnakes and leaving him with a broken leg. While recuperating in the comforts of home and the presence of his devoted wife, Weatherby's need for intense, undivided attention from Mildred is quite clear: "He ate what he could and was kind to her and loved her, and he needed her to be there whenever he did awake, for his dreams troubled him. They always recalled the work he had been doing on the mountain, and they were always about death" (Ehle, *Road* 191). By telling Mildred of his dreams, Weatherby is sharing this burden of the increasingly more complicated and deadly work on the road with her, and it shows just how self-obsessed he truly is. Rather than harboring some of the true nature of the work's difficulty from his

undoubtedly already concerned wife, Weatherby feels entitled to share his worry, his concern and torment with Mildred, exploiting her affection for him and burdening her with more information and turmoil than she deserves.

Weatherby's exploitation of Mildred's affection continues as Mildred learns of Weatherby's attachment to HenryAnna, the young, beautiful, and precocious mountain woman who frequently visits the men along the road. While sleeping through his dark dreams of the road, Mildred overhears Weatherby mention HenryAnna's name. When he next woke up, his wife asks him about HenryAnna because she notices that in his sleep he often talks to her "and asks her for help" (Ehle, *Road* 191). Weatherby quickly reassures his worried wife, telling her, "Don't you worry about HenryAnna . . . . She's only a child. I think of her more as a daughter . . ." (Ehle, *Road* 191). This, of course, is not true, as Weatherby will later confess his love for HenryAnna and hope to win her heart over his biggest competitor, his foreman Cumberland. Weatherby's willingness to exploit the kindness of his wife and lie to her about his feelings for HenryAnna shows his lack of restraint, and his unwillingness to curb his exploitation of the attention and affections of those who care for him.

Given the way Weatherby Wright treats the white women in his life, and the convicts leased out to work along the road, many of whom are African Americans, it is perhaps no surprise at all that he ordered the black, female convicts working along the road to have even harsher working conditions and even more menial tasks. Ehle writes that for the black, female inmates, activity "began in the morning, an hour before dawn when the women were awakened by the guards. They came from the boxcar, wiping the sleep from their eyes, trying to get the soreness out of their muscles, stretching and yawning and cursing each other"

(*Road* 36). The women in the camp were forced to find “their way in the dark to the creek, where they were required to bathe, shouting out in anguish at the burning coldness of the water” (Ehle, *Road* 36). The female prisoners were then tasked each day with preparing meals for the hundreds of inmates and Weatherby’s workers, cleaning the various campsites and offices, and doing laundry (Ehle, *Road* 37-38). In the midst of having to complete all of these incredibly labor intensive tasks, the female convicts conscripted to the road also had to carefully navigate their own paths, so as to avoid being grabbed and groped by male inmates. Ehle writes that if male inmates came close enough to grab onto a female inmate, “the offender would be flogged, but he would accept the punishment for a chance to grab hold of a woman, even if he could only hold her until the guards began beating him” (*Road* 36-37). Weatherby clearly did not exercise any restraint in regards towards these female inmates, using his power over them to exploit their labor in order to complete the road. In their day-to-day lives while working along the road, the female inmates had little autonomy, agency, and control over their daily activities. These women were very much at the mercy of the whims of others throughout each lengthy working day.

Ehle writes that the lack of female autonomy in the recreational activities along the road even extended to the sexual activity of the convicts. If work along the road was particularly productive during the week, male and female prisoners were allowed a few hours in the woods free from the shackles and chains used to control their behavior during the work along the road.<sup>27</sup> There was, of course, some supervision as Tommy Goodman, Weatherby’s man in charge of the female prisoners would intently watch this illicit activity, along with

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<sup>27</sup> While this brief opportunity for socializing was for some women enjoyable, Ehle is careful to provide significant descriptions of armed guards, male voyeurism, and sexual exchanges to indicate that these scenes involve violence and episodes of rape and prostitution. While some women certainly suffered more than others, overall there is a clear exploitation of the women prisoners in this scene.



other shotgun-armed guards along the perimeter of the woods. Ehle describes that after this activity was over, Tommy Goodman forced the women to immediately bathe in the frigid creek and jump up and down after leaving the woods, in order to prevent pregnancy (*Road* 39-40). Although Tommy describes to Weatherby Wright that he feels about the female prisoners like he would his “own sisters and daughters,” his treatment of them robs the women of their own sexual freedom and control. Ehle writes of Tommy that his “interest in all his women remained clinical. If a woman got sick he would sympathetically diagnose her condition himself and decide if she needed to rest; if a woman got scratched or bitten . . . he would worry over the injury as much as the woman did, often more” (*Road* 40). While Tommy’s attentiveness to the women may have some degree of care to it, it is highly unlikely that he truly thinks of them as he would his “own sisters and daughters.” It seems far more likely that his interest stems from a need to control the women, to maintain their physical and reproductive health in order to meet the ever-growing demands of his supervisor, Weatherby Wright.

As Weatherby realizes he is falling behind schedule in building the road and after Sow Mountain devours the Mud Cut engine and its engineer, Bolton, who was trapped inside, Weatherby writes to the North Carolina Governor to request additional prison workers, 300 of them, to ensure that the road is completed on time. While this request may at first seem a necessary measure in order to finish such an intensive project as building a railroad, Weatherby’s statements about how to treat the prisoners illustrate just how exploitative the entire project truly is. Weatherby comments to his foremen that the best way to contain the prisoners, for which they do not yet have proper housing space, is not to hold them at all but to “work them” to “let them get like the road itself” (Ehle, *Road* 97), to let

them become hardened and vicious, so that they will be formidable opponents for Sow Mountain. Weatherby Wright does not recognize the “unique ethical position” that humans occupy according to Aldo Leopold (Ryden 1). Rather than recognizing the “technological and imaginative capabilities” of building a railroad over and through a mountain as a reason to employ the “responsibility of restraint,” Weatherby sees his standing within the world as an endorsement of his exploitative actions. Thinking of his power over the incoming inmates, Weatherby thought of their abilities and “welcomed the fierceness and strength, for he suspected they would be needed before the Road was done, directed not against each other but against the mountain herself” (Ehle, *Road* 97). Here it is apparent that Weatherby’s intention to employ 300 additional inmates is not so much a matter of having to accomplish a goal but rather having an easily exploitable workforce and using them to further punish and enact revenge on the mountain.

After his entrapment within Sow Mountain and spending time recuperating at home, Weatherby Wright’s already delayed road project fell even further behind schedule. When Weatherby does arrive back at the road, his foreman Cumberland laments the poor progress of the road in Weatherby’s absence, expressing his concerns that the entire project is even further off schedule. Weatherby assures Cumberland that he the road will be completed, that the solution is not “to become inhumane,” but rather to “match” the inmates up against “her temper,” meaning Sow Mountain’s (*Road* 194-195). Weatherby goes on to illustrate that he does in fact recognize the power and influence of the mountain, warning Cumberland to be careful because he judges the temper of Sow Mountain to be “a vicious one,” elaborating that he “never saw worse” and assuring Cumberland that “she has no sense of mercy” (Ehle, *Road* 194-195). While Weatherby clearly does recognize the agency of the mountain, he

views it not as part of himself, an intricate and powerful part of the world to which he belongs, but instead as a bitter and vindictive being.

Weatherby's perception of the mountain's cruel power and his own failure to maintain steady progress along the road prompts him to write to the governor of North Carolina to request an "addition in time and manpower" in order to complete the railroad (Ehle, *Road* 198). The governor quickly responds that he has "managed to inveigle an additional three months" to extend the road's completion deadline and he offers to send Weatherby an additional 75 prisoners to work along the road (Ehle, *Road* 198). This request, along with Weatherby's earlier request for 300 additional prisoners to work along the road highlights that rather than finding a "right relationship" with the landscape around him, Weatherby instead increases the exploitation of the landscape and other people in order to accomplish his goal of completing the road.

## **Conclusion**

In both *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*, John Ehle's novels expose issues of exploitation. Wendell Berry's ideas about the dividing line between "exploitation and nurture" significantly enrich the discussion of the abuse of both people and planet in these texts. For Berry, the model nurturer is "the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer," whereas the "model exploiter" is "a strip-miner" (9). Berry further emphasizes the difference between these two types of people as he writes: "The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's his community's, his country's" (9). Readers of John Ehle's fiction can easily see how these categories of "exploiters" and "nurturers" apply to Ehle's characters: Mooney Wright, Tinkler Harrison, and Weatherby Wright. In *The Land Breakers*, it is Mooney Wright's careful attention to the success and

health of those around him that solidify his role as a “nurturer” in the novel. In contrast, Tinkler Harrison fits Berry’s description of an “exploiter” because he is more concerned with increasing his own financial standing than he is helping to grow the overall productivity of his surrounding community. Similarly in *The Road*, Weatherby Wright is so determined to complete the railroad that he fails to consider the peripheral impacts of the project on the surrounding people, landscape, and communities.

What sets Mooney Wright apart as a “nurturer” rather than an “exploiter” is his ability to employ the “responsibility of restraint” as described in the work of Aldo Leopold to limit his own impulses to exploit. While Mooney is initially impressed with Tinkler Harrison’s large, sprawling home, he limits himself from emulating his neighbor’s design because he is aware of the use of slave labor in the home’s production. Rather than purchasing slaves of his own, Mooney restrains his own ambition and instead helps those around them. Instead of exploiting those around him, Mooney successfully utilizes the “responsibility of restraint” to nurture his community, focusing on its health and longevity.

In these novels, the interconnected abuse of both land and people further reveals just how applicable the fifth and sixth post-pastoral questions are to examinations of Ehle’s Appalachian fiction. Reading John Ehle illustrates how the “responsibility of restraint” can help us navigate the divide between “exploitation” and “nurture” in our own lives. In understanding that our exploitation of the earth stems from the same impulse to exploit each other, reading John Ehle’s post-pastoral texts helps us understand how to find the right relationship with our natural home.

## Chapter 5: A Coda

In *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice*, Terry Gifford writes that John Muir's use of the post-pastoral "pushes the boundaries of language to reintegrate in his writing the physical and the imaginative, the scientific and the spiritual" (151). It is in this post-pastoral combination of discourses which "seeks to offer a complicated representation of nature" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 51) that we can truly begin to understand what John Muir meant when he wrote, "Going to the mountains is going home" (qtd. in Gifford, *Reconnecting* 152). The post-pastoral offers a clear and useful theoretical model to understand the workings of John Ehle's novels *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, the discussion of Gifford's first and second post-pastoral questions in combination with the natural sublime demonstrates that Mooney Wright in *The Land Breakers* experienced humility in the face of awe-inspiring nature, while Weatherby Wright in *The Road* experienced only horror and fear. Mooney's humbleness in response to the natural world prompted him to conserve it, as he taught himself and his neighbors to build small and sustainable, yet sturdy homes in the Appalachian woods. In contrast, Weatherby Wright's determination to alter the landscape around him in *The Road* resulted in three terrifying encounters with nature, all of which made him even more leery and

aggressively reactionary to the environment around him and certainly did not inspire him to conserve or protect the landscape's natural integrity.

In Chapter 3 of this thesis, the discussion of Gifford's third and fourth post-pastoral questions and the incorporation of an "everyday nature" into the identities of Ehle's characters in *The Land Breakers* and *The Road* demonstrate that by coming to understand the outer nature around them, they also learned more about themselves. In watching springtime manifest itself across the mountain landscape, Mooney Wright learned that even in the aftermath of his immense grief over the loss of his wife, Imy, that he too could be reborn, could experience new life and growth just like the landscape around him. In *The Road*, HenryAnna Plover's understanding of the intimate connection between who she was and the world around her, allowed her to steer clear from any long-term romantic entanglements with Cumberland and Weatherby—men who did not share her environmentally-aware sentiments.

In Chapter 4 of this thesis, the discussion of Gifford's fifth and sixth post-pastoral questions and the use of the "responsibility of restraint" to navigate the divide between "exploitation" and "nurture" emphasizes the differences between Mooney Wright and Weatherby Wright. Mooney and Weatherby exhibit starkly different approaches to how they treat those around them as well as their surrounding landscapes. Mooney Wright successfully exhibits restraint to avoid using the highly exploitative practice of his time, slave labor. Unlike Mooney Wright, Tinkler Harrison in *The Land Breakers* uses slave labor, which increases his exploitation of other people as well as the earth as he builds an expansive plantation style home in the woods of their community, Harristown. Weatherby Wright is also incapable of employing the "responsibility of restraint" to curtail his exploitation and abuse of all those that come in his path. Weatherby is so determined to complete the road that

he welcomes hazardous construction practices for his workers and requires more and more inmate laborers, all of which increase the exploitation of both people and planet.

In contrast, because of his ability to apply the “responsibility of restraint” to his own actions in the natural environment, Mooney Wright, unlike Tinkler Harrison or Weatherby Wright, is Ehle’s only male character to arrive at a “right relationship” with his natural home. The post-pastoral offers us a way to reconnect with our environment in order to find a relationship between people and planet “that serves both culture and nature” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 13-14). Unlike Weatherby Wright, it is clear in *The Land Breakers* that Mooney Wright is a responsible citizen of both the environment and his community—he demonstrates his awareness of the quality Gifford describes: “as a member of a complex ecosystem, our species must use its culture to look after other species’ cultures and communities on which it depends” (*Reconnecting* 36).

In *The Land Breakers* and *The Road*, John Ehle provides readers with hope for finding the “right relationship” between mountains and mountaineers in the Appalachian region. The post-pastoral search for reconnecting humans with the environment around them is present in these novels, particularly through Ehle’s emphasis on humility in the face of the natural sublime, identity that incorporates an “everyday nature,” and the responsibility to restrain our exploitation of others and the world around us. John Ehle shows readers that the key to finding home in the mountains is in fact not to “break the land” but to live on it and with it, leaving a small ecological impact and encouraging others to do the same.

Ehle’s work clearly embraces the post-pastoral. Furthermore, the frequent presence of contestations between nature and human nature in Appalachian literature also suggests that many more Appalachian authors also employ the post-pastoral in their writings, illustrating

that the post-pastoral is a fertile field for new literary scholarship. The post-pastoral is an excellent “theoretical fit” for examining many additional works of Appalachian literature and nature writing as well, including Wilma Dykeman’s *The French Broad*, Amy Greene’s *Long Man*, Julia Franks’s *Over the Plain Houses*, and Ron Rash’s *Serena*.

To illustrate the way that the post-pastoral ideas work well for analyzing Appalachian fiction, Terry Gifford, in *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice*, applies post-pastoral concepts to the acclaimed work of Charles Frazier, which won the National Book Award in 1997. Gifford writes that Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* “seeks to heal the separations of nature and culture” as is common in post-pastoral texts (*Reconnecting* 135). Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* is a post-pastoral text, Gifford explains, because it avoids “the idealization of the *Idylls*” or the romanticized portrayal of nature, and is informed “by a modern sense of environmental knowingness” (*Reconnecting* 135). Gifford comments that although “pastoral idylls do appear occasionally” in *Cold Mountain*, Frazier is careful to include hints of the dangers inherent in the idealization of a landscape (*Reconnecting* 138). Throughout the novel, Frazier’s protagonist, a Confederate soldier named Inman, quotes from a copy of the early naturalist text *Bartram’s Travels*, a volume “whose aesthetic vision and lyrical prose are straight out of the European tradition of pastoral” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 138). According to Gifford, Frazier does not include these idyllic allusions to inspire awe in readers who journey with Inman through the Appalachian Mountains, but instead to contrast the way in which Inman encounters the landscape with that of William Bartram, the author of *Bartram’s Travels*. Gifford writes: “Frazier uses Bartram to distance his own writing about nature from the pastoral” (*Reconnecting* 138). Unlike William Bartram who was “traveling through” the mountains “consuming landscape to make literature,”



Inman, on his long journey home from war, is instead “scrabbling through dirt, slopes, and trees for survival” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 138). Frazier’s juxtaposition of traditional pastoral literature with the harsh realities of Inman’s trek reveals the role of the post-pastoral in *Cold Mountain*. Unlike Leo Marx’s complex pastoral, the post-pastoral avoids the idyllic while exhibiting the dangers inherent in nature, and also begs readers to consider how to find a “right relationship” between humans and their natural home.

Gifford writes that Charles Frazier’s novel *Cold Mountain* avoids idyllic depictions of the natural world and represents “a modern sense of environmental knowingness” in the intellectual quest “to find a way of learning to live in a landscape that is both directly teaching, to the attuned ear and mind, and is at the same time culturally constructed, both by that accumulated learning itself and by alienating aspects of culture” (*Reconnecting* 135, 134). According to Gifford, in *Cold Mountain* the characters’ abilities to survive in the rugged Appalachian wilderness demonstrate “the difference between connecting and alienating attitudes toward the land” (*Reconnecting* 134). For the characters of *Cold Mountain*, primarily Confederate soldier Inman and his love interest Ada, learning to live in the landscape “quickly comes down to a matter of personal integrity” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 134). As the Civil War rages on, Ada is nearly starving until a neighboring mountain woman named Ruby comes to live with her and provides Ada with “an education in how to live from her land” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 136). Inman is engaging in a wide variety of lessons as well, as he comments early in the novel of his participation in the Civil War: “This journey will be the axle of my life” (Frazier, *Cold Mountain* 55). Inman’s journey not only impacts his life, but as Gifford describes, it also “takes him closer to a sense of ‘doing things right’ in living from and surviving in the landscape” (*Reconnecting* 136). As Ada and Inman both

embark on the difficult task of staying alive in a rough and war-torn landscape, they engage with the post-pastoral quest to find the “right relationship” between people and planet. Terry Gifford aptly concludes his examination of *Cold Mountain*: “Charles Frazier has produced a text that asks us to confront some character-testing lessons located in a landscape that demands ‘doing things right’ in all its subtle senses, where post-pastoral readings render ecology and ethics inseparable” (*Reconnecting* 140). It is this quest for “doing things right” in terms of human interactions with the natural world that validates *Cold Mountain* as a post-pastoral text.<sup>28</sup>

The relevance of the post-pastoral to lead us to insights surrounding this search for “doing things right” in a landscape extend far beyond studies of Appalachian literature and in fact, can help all people reconnect with their planetary home. Gifford writes that “Muir is valuable to America as an iconic figure because he represents a veering of American culture back toward finding that ‘right relationship’ with what, after all, defines America as distinctive—the landscapes of the nation, the environment that is its crucial resource and its home” (*Reconnecting* 36). Muir’s value to the American people, as described by Terry Gifford, does not limit Muir’s writings or the post-pastoral simply to interrogations of American culture. As Gifford also describes, “culture is how we live our nature” (*Reconnecting* 51) and since the post-pastoral “is the search for a relationship that serves both culture and nature” (*Reconnecting* 13-14), it is also the universal search for “making better choices, individually and socially, for the survival of our species in its contested, evolving, amazing barely understood, but inescapable home” (*Reconnecting* 176).

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<sup>28</sup> In his essay entitled, “Nature’s Eloquent Speech in Charles Frazier’s *Nightwoods*,” Gifford also makes the case that Frazier’s novel *Nightwoods* is a post-pastoral text.

The post-pastoral has the ability to reconnect humans to the natural world around them prompting an increase in environmental protection efforts and an improvement in the relationship between humans and their planetary home. The post-pastoral's emphasis on the search for a "right relationship" between people and planet also offers incredible insight and much needed direction within ecocriticism as well. As Harvard professor and Thoreau scholar Lawrence Buell writes in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*:

Unless ecocriticism can squarely address the question of *how* nature matters for those readers, critics, teachers, and students for whom environmental concern does not mean nature preservation first and foremost and for whom nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness narrative do not seem compelling forms of environmental imagination, then the movement may fission and wane. (174)

The post-pastoral, particularly with an emphasis on humility in the face of the natural sublime, the incorporation of an "everyday nature," and careful dedication to the "responsibility of restraint" can, in fact, appeal to those for whom nature writing and conservation is not a top priority. Although it may seem a bit anthropocentric, by focusing on the search for a "right relationship" between nature and human nature, the post-pastoral has the ability to appeal to a much wider, more diverse audience than the broader field of ecocriticism can on its own. By uniting the varied fields of ecocriticism into the six guiding questions of the post-pastoral, Gifford presents ecocritics with a toolbox incorporates the diverse tributaries of ecocritical thought and serves as a way to reconnect humans with the earth. By acknowledging multiple veins of ecocritical thought within the post-pastoral, Gifford refocuses ecocriticism on Buell's question of "*how* nature matters." The post-pastoral's diverse combination of discourses offers a broader examination of the interactions

between people and planet that is approachable even to those that perhaps do not have the keenest interest in environmental conservation and nature writing.

Terry Gifford's framing of the post-pastoral "is intended to offer a tentative working theory rather than a dogma, to offer criteria for critique rather than a set of rules for the ecopolice" (*Reconnecting* 173). This "criteria," as in the six guiding questions that post-pastoral texts invite, is incredibly useful in prompting readers, writers, and teachers to carefully examine the relationship between nature and human nature. This loose theoretical framework which "begins by asking questions about awe as a counter to hubris, but ends by examining attitudes toward responsibility to people and planet" accomplishes the remarkable, by "demanding accountability for the unavoidable choices of the 'disturbance' of our everyday lives embedded in the life of the planet" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 173). It is imperative for human beings to gain a greater understanding of our species' disturbance on the earth, given that our impacts have been so massive that we have fundamentally altered the planet's geologic record.

In fact, the human footprint on the earth has become so indelible that scientists have even renamed the current geologic epoch. In February 2000, Nobel Prize Laureate for Chemistry Paul Crutzen traveled to Mexico to participate in the International Geosphere-Biosphere (IGBP) conference, hosted by the United Nations. At this summit, scientists from across the planet began debating the human impacts on the environment, and repeatedly, they discussed the current epoch of geologic time, the Holocene (which started around 11,700 years ago). Crutzen, feeling so distraught in contemplating the extent of human environmental degradation that has transpired since the Industrial Revolution interrupted the IGBP chairman to announce "we are no longer in the Holocene . . . we are already in the

Anthropocene” (Schwägerl, *Anthropocene* 9). Crutzen’s eruption “landed among the experts like a time-bomb”—had thrust upon them a dismal reality, the fact that the human impacts on the earth are so powerful, so indelible that we are now in a new geologic epoch, one whose name comes from the greek *Anthropos* meaning humans and *cene* from *kainos*, meaning new. Alas, at this February 2000 conference, international scientists deemed the current segment of geologic time, the “*Anthropocene*: the new epoch of humans” (Schwägerl, *Anthropocene* 9). This new age of humans is particularly disturbing because it not only dictates our planet’s past, but its future as well.

In the age of the Anthropocene, the human impact on the earth, which was previously measured in “days, years, and centuries,” is now conceived of as altering the planet’s “geologic scale, of thousands and even millions of years” (Schwägerl, *Anthropocene* 10), meaning that we now live on a planet shaped and permanently altered by human existence.<sup>29</sup> Because we now understand the dramatic and encompassing scope of the human impact on the planet, we as people must take all means necessary to understand and mitigate our tracks on the earth. The post-pastoral is one of many ways that humans can find a “right relationship” with their natural home, a task that becomes increasingly more necessary by the day. In the modern age of the Anthropocene, where human impacts on the Earth’s geologic record and ecosystems are so massive, so indelible that we now have our own epoch, people have the obligation to understand and mitigate the “disturbance” of our presence on the planet.

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<sup>29</sup> Schwägerl’s book is not nearly as dismal as this portrayal of the Anthropocene may be. He believes that human beings in fact already have all the necessary technology, ideology, and ingenuity in order to curtail our impact on the earth. We just need international and interdisciplinary collaboration to do so. See *The Anthropocene: The Human Era and How It Shapes Our Planet*, Synergetic Press, 2014.

The post-pastoral forces us to examine the ways in which we interact with the physical world and seek improvement in those interactions, and demands duality and interdisciplinarity. This blurring of previously siloed discourses—including “science and arts, arts and activism, academic and indigenous values, heritage and health, biodiversity and human health, listening and curing” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 176)—will better equip humans to handle and adapt to the environment of the future. The post-pastoral encourages “several kinds of reconnection” of disciplines. All of these combinations of disciplines and knowledge bases allow humans interested in ecological issues to arrive at “a more complex judgment than might otherwise have been possible” by examining “changing evidence within the multiple discourses available” (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 176). *Reconnecting with John Muir* uses “John Muir as a symbol of integrated knowledge and multiple modes of discourse” in order to address the highly complex, fractured, and disjointed issues facing our planet in the modern era (Gifford 176). It seems entirely fitting to employ the legacy of John Muir, the man who was at the same time both a scientist and a mountain climber, a glaciologist and woodsman, a writer and an activist, to promote the combination of discourses needed to address complicated contemporary environmental issues such as environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change. Through the post-pastoral’s union of these knowledge sets, students, scholars, and ecocritics alike can more fully understand what John Muir meant in his famous quotation: “Going to the mountains is going home.”

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